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GUN SMOKE

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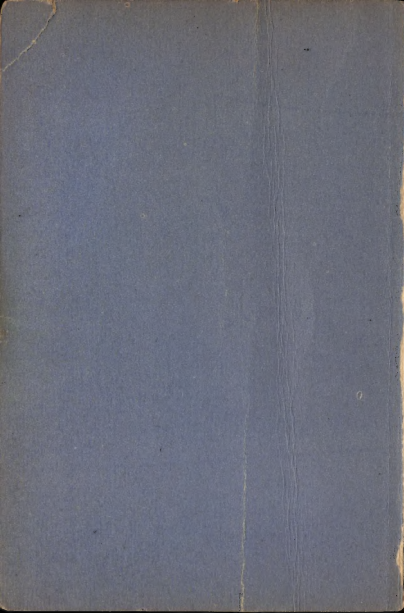
Western Stories
Selected by
**GENE
AUTRY**



WITH MAP ON BACK COVER

A DELL WESTERN





Alberta James

RIDING—ROPING—RUSTLING

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GUN SMOKE YARNS

Selected by
GENE AUTRY

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY

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GUN SMOKE YARNS

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GUN SMOKE APLENTY!

Here are ten yarns packed with thrills and excitement. You may be surprised that they're not all gun stories—but if you don't get a kick out of Ross Santee's "The Lower Trail" and Omar Barker's "Between a Rock and a Hard Place" and George Pattullo's "Blue Blazes" I'll eat my favorite white ten-gallon hat, because they're just plain filled with drama and breathless action. And for an overflowing measure of rip-roaring gun-talk storytelling, dig into 'Gene Cunningham's "Ranger Luck" and Harry Knibbs's "The Rats' Nest" and J. E. Grinstead's "The Haunted Ranch." Man! You can't beat 'em!

Then for a chuckling change of pace read Charles Tenney Jackson's "Half a Scalp," in which two old deputies run into gun smoke at the end of the trail. "Three Shots at Kelsey," by William Corson, is a man-hunt story with a grim twist, and O. Henry's "The Reformation of Calliope" has the old master's clever style and surprise wallop. And if you like a yarn full of perilous situations and long-shot chance-taking, Bill Mowery's "The Constable of Lone Sioux" is sure your meat.

Some people, I know, are in the habit of pooh-poohing Western stories. They say that these stories give a "distorted" picture of the West—that banditry and gun-play and assorted other violence have been the unusual, not the usual, thing in the land of sagebrush and saddle leather. Suppose those folks are right, and a dry-gulching or two hasn't been the everyday before-breakfast happening, or even an after-dinner digestion-settler for the average hombre. There's still been gun smoke aplenty, especially in the days of the Old West, and it's the exciting things that people like to read about—the sheriff throwing down on the outlaws, the little rancher facing the syndicate's gunmen with his .45 blazing, the honest cowpuncher tangling with the crooked gambler.

GENE AUTRY



Ranger Luck

The Haunted Ranch

BURR DALEY checked sorrel King at the top of Sad Woman Pass. Outwardly he was all that a young Ranger should be, in clothes and horse-furnishings. But inwardly—

His smooth, brown face hardened as he looked back savagely across the rolling miles of Three-Bar range. Behind him was old Ad Barron's house—and Lou Barron.

"What'd I have to come back for?" he demanded of King. "I was doing all right down at Verde with the company. If I saw a lot of pretty girls, well! I could see 'em without coming ears-over-tin cup and chewing gravel. One was as pretty as another and when they hurrahed me, I could just hurrah 'em back. Didn't mean a thing, to them or me. Right here—" brown fingers tapped the sleek stock of the carbine scabbarded beneath his leg "—was my *querida*! Then I had to ask Cap'n Ladd for this Blanco detail. Had to come back home. Had to find Lou—the way she is now. *Amor de dios*! The way she is now—"

Grim face and narrowed blue eyes softened as he thought of the Three-Bars' dark, lovely crown princess.

Those five years away from Blanco County, which had changed him from a reckless kid bronc' twister to a Ranger sergeant well known from success in a score of difficult, dangerous details, had worked pure marvels in Lou Barron. The skinny tomboy of 15, who, in flannel shirt and faded overalls and rusty puncher boots, had ridden hell-bent with him across the range, was now completely the Young Lady. More! She was entirely aware of her effect upon men, particularly upon Burr Daley and—

"Alf Quern!" Burr snarled, so suddenly and so viciously that King jumped—as he would never have jumped at sound of a shot. "Dude Alf! Big—good-looking—rich—strutting—deputy sheriff—and—and damn good man."

Blanco County expected Lou to marry Alf Quern after a proper time of reigning as belle of the neighborhood. Burr had heard as much from the moment of return, before he had seen the new Lou and, in his own phrase, handed over his scalp. He had owned but one slim reason for hope: for all his good looks, his status as top hand of the Blanco country, his father's cow kingdom, Alf had no more promise from Lou than—Burr Daley, who had nothing whatever to offer a rich man's daughter but vague hopes for the future. Unless, tonight at Blanco's annual dance, she should say yes to that question Alf had been asking for two years. . . .

Burr lifted the split-reins and King took the Pass at his rocking-chair foxtrot, leaving his rider all too free to follow his gloomy train of thought.

With no real reason to expect it, he *had* expected to take Lou to the dance. It was the region's biggest celebration. It owned a tradition so set through the years that a girl thought long and long before she went to Blanco Fiesta with a man whom she was not willing to marry—even ready to marry immediately. Knowing all this, Lou had not waited to be asked by him. No! She had "already promised Alf to go with him."

"Calm as calm about it, too!" Burr reminded himself. "Alf came by yesterday early—how could she know I was going? nobody knew but what I was working a case. Why, she acted like it was my fault I got that fool yarn about Charley Ponnell being seen around the T-Up-and-Down and wasted three whole days chasing that o'n'ry chuck-line rider! Wish I hadn't come back here and seen her again. Anyway—almost wish I hadn't—"

King went down-slope toward that handful of gray-brown adobes which made the tiny village of Tres Jacales—"Three Shacks." Coming abreast the largest house, where fat Juan Terras and his fatter son Juancito grew richer year by year from liquor, monte games, dances, the simple groceries and dry goods needed by Mexican farmer and rancher, Burr looked sharply, if automatically, at the half-dozen horses, the two rickety wagons, in sight.

All were obviously of Mexican ownership, so he made no stop.

Frio Sill's Circle-S was Burr's headquarters for the time being. But Burr thought grimly that his time here was short. Old Sheriff Wall was riding again. The Hoy brothers were safe under lock and key in Blanco jail, with evidence of their guilt in the county attorney's hands. The smoothest, most mysterious case of rustling in Burr's experience was finished, and sheriff and county attorney had written Captain Ladd that complete credit was due Sergeant Daley. If tricky, murderous Charley Ponnell was still in the country, or stupid enough to come back, the sheriff and Alf Quern could loop him.

Burr turned from the Blanco road into the Circle-S gate. King broke into a lope as he saw the low 'dobe house ahead. When he rounded the corrals and stopped, Mig' Aranda straightened where he had been dozing in the feed-room door. He yawned and waggled a limp hand, yawned again. He and Burr were life-long acquaintances.

"Anybody home?" Burr asked him, and Mig' shook his head.

"Nobody. The *patron* and *patrona* are in town. Jim and Turkey Track are in the north pasture. The *patron* has unloaded those bull calves. I am looking for the post-hole digger, that I may mend the fence by the great road."

He leaned comfortably and watched Burr unsaddle. When King was comfortable in the corral, snorting over Circle-S hay, Burr carried saddle, bridle, and blanket to the harness room. He came back to hunker near Mig's seat and roll a cigarette.

In his mind, Burr turned over what was more vague hope than plan, as he had done several times in the past few days—since hearing old Colorado Bittner talk of selling or leasing that neat, prospering outfit, the Rocking Chair. Colorado was tired of what he called "widowering" and wanted to go up to Fort Worth and live with his married daughter. Fifteen thousand he considered a fair price; five thousand a fair down-payment.

But, Burr wondered, would Colorado consider some

sort of manager-partner proposition?

If his candidate happened to be a pure-minded, honest young top-hand cowpunch that's right now a Ranger sergeant? Burr asked himself, with lift of one mouth-corner, half humorous, half grim. *This aforesaid candidate mentioned in the indictment owning besides his clothes and saddle and horse and guns not five thousand dollars, but just about five thousand cents!*

Then he looked jerkily at Mig's thin, shrewd face. The vaquero's black eyes had rolled to him, narrowed, intent.

"I said that Luck, it is a strange thing—is it not truth? Consider, old friend: One man—to him comes everything that he could want, while he does nothing to bring it. But his neighbor—*ay de mi!* He goes through life as if ten grinning devils of misfortune perched behind him always upon the cantle of his saddle!" Mig sighed and shook his shock-head. But the shrewd eyes never wavered in their stare at Burr.

"Don Alf Quern, now—for all his life he has had good fortune. A man of size and handsomeness and riches, Don Alf! One to catch the eyes of the pretty girls. Now that he works no longer with his father upon the Bar-B-Q he can wear the beaver Stetson, the shirt of red silk, the kid boots. Even his badge as the good sheriff's deputy, it is of gold!"

Tiny puffs of smoke rose like a string of bubbles from Burr's cigarette. He looked down at his neat blue flannel shirt, his gray woolen trousers, his plain tan boots. Certainly there was nothing of the dude about him. Nothing that he knew about his five-nine of height, one-fifty of weight, "to catch the eyes of the pretty girls—" Then he shrugged.

"You were right lucky, yourself, last week," he drawled. "I sort of figured we'd have the job of burying you, Miggy, when Pedro Serrano started to halve you. But his dagger just glanced off that peso in your shirt-pocket."

"I knew that it would not hurt me—Pedro's dagger," Mig' said calmly. "*Mira! Look! My talisman.*"

From a pocket he got out a bit of grayish metal, flat,

kidney-shaped, much like the tap a shoemaker puts on a runover heel. He held it out and Burr took the thing mechanically.

"It is an ancient charm of the people of my uncle, who gave it to me before he died last month. Once, many years ago, that talisman belonged to the Second Chief of the Eight Yaqui Villages on the Rio Yaqui in Sonora. It has brought me luck, my friend: I win at monte where I used to feed the gamblers. Maria is not so quick to look at men other than her husband. Pedro Serrano's dagger did not so much as gash my skin—"

Burr grinned, if twistedly. Luck— It occurred to him that he could use a tolerable supply of the commodity. But it would have to be a bigger *leopoldina* than this thing of Mig's that would give him the one thing in the world he wanted!

This wouldn't be big enough for my needings, he told himself. *Uh-uh—not if it was as wide and long as a hay-barn door!* He handed it back and flipped away the butt of his cigarette. As he began to roll another, he stared out across the greasewood and mesquite to the low crests of the Blancos. As well go back to Verde and see if Captain Ladd could give him another detail—one hard enough, risky enough, to crowd a slim, dark, lovely girl out of a fool Ranger's mind. If no letter came from the captain, he would wire him.

Mig' was right: Alf Quern was handsome enough to swing almost any girl his way. He had the ways of a man, too, even if he had not been able to loop the clever, careful Hoys and Charley Ponnell. That work had needed the training, the "puzzle-buster" instinct, of a veteran man hunter. Plus luck, too, Burr admitted.

"Burr!" Mig' called loudly. "I said that I need ten dollars today and—" he grinned—"does this, my charm, give me the luck that you have so much to lend me? Consider! I will let you hold the talisman until I have broken this monte game at Tres Jacales and given you the money again! While you carry it—this is a virtue of the thing—you will have the luck, as if it belonged to you."

"*Sta bien!* I'll let you take ten—but not because I believe your yarn, Miggy. I'll take charge of the charm, too. But don't you think for one *chiquito* minute that I put my trust in it to pull you back with the ten—uh-uh! I've got a lot more faith in that Winchester of mine. I can do magic with her!"

"Tomorrow! No later than tomorrow I will give back to you the ten dollars and take the talisman again. Now, I must catch up that *grulla* horse of mine and—"

"How about the post holes? You were hunting the digger."

"I have bethought me—the digger, it is broken. But I can fix it and dig the holes before the *patron* comes home. Ah, yes! Tomorrow. Now, old friend, *adiós!* Until tomorrow!"

Burr laughed and watched him go with the two five-dollar bills. He dropped the bit of metal into a pocket of his trousers and moved toward the kitchen door. Inside, Maria, Mig's pretty 16-year-old wife, smiled at him from the table where she kneaded bread. Burr spoke to her and went straight on through the house. Not for him the slightest misunderstanding with Mig' the jealous, the quick-handed—and Maria would flirt with a corral post. He crossed the big front room and went out to make himself comfortable in the deep gallery, where he could smoke and look toward the road and think gloomily about Lou Barron.

A long half hour dragged by; then he saw Sheriff Wall's red-wheeled buckboard turn into the Circle-S gate. The matched pintos whirled at the gallery-end and Sheriff Wall lifted his hand to Burr.

"Hi, cowboy!" he called cheerfully. "Mighty fine to be out again. Thought them damn' rheumatics had me hobbled for keeps, this time. But now I'm up, I aim to stay up. Busy?"

"No more business than a road runner," Burr assured him. "Light and rest your saddle. Better stay for supper. I'm plain orphan this evening, both sides the house. Fine to have you."

"Nah, I got to git along and git a confession off my shiny old black soul. I—well—" he shook his grizzled head, lean, furrowed face a frowning, worried mask "—I done a mighty, mighty dirty trick to a mighty sweet girl and I might's well go on to the Three-Bars and confess and collect my combing."

"Dirty trick? Girl? Three-Bars?" Burr grunted, leaning forward. "Uh—Lou? You talking about Lou?"

"Uh-huh. You see, Burr, her and Alf aimed to trip the light fandango like the book says tonight at the dance. Then I got word about a bad cutting-scrape over at San Andres and likely more trouble coming out of it and—well, I had to send Alf to take care of things and that leaves poor li'l Lou kind of hanging on a limb, unless—Say! Could you take her, cowboy?"

"You make just one move with your littlest finger, before I land back here with my hair in a braid and I—I'll shoot you plumb in two with Frio's old buffalo Sharps!" Burr yelled over-shoulder, as he ran toward the corral. "Right with you!"

Something like five minutes later he sent King up to the buckboard. The pintos wheeled back toward the gate and Burr, reaching into a pocket for a match, felt metal. "By Gemini!" he breathed. "Miggy! I wonder!"

"Ain't going to the Bars," Sheriff Wall told him, staring solemnly straight over the pintos' ears. "Uh—reckon no need of that, now. But I'll side you as far as Tres Jacales. Take a look around Terras's dive. What you 'low about Charley Ponnell, Burr? I was hoping that tale about him using around the Tees was straight. But I reckon he's on the safe side the Bravo. *Por dios!* If Charley knows what's the real what, he won't show up around this Blanco country no more. Alf, he's no detective like you, but he'll tie into a buzzsaw and give it the first whirl. Good with a hogleg, too. Good as Charley—or even you."

"Better'n either one of us with a short gun," Burr conceded honestly, if without interest. "Winchester is *my* fiddle—"

There was a great deal of noise in the Terras place as

they came toward it. A hundred yards away the sheriff pulled in. Automatically his big hand slid under his coat as they listened to yells and crashes as of bottles breaking—then the flat crash of shots.

Burr's hand was thumb-hooked in his cartridge belt over the walnut butt of his Colt when a stocky man backed out of Terras's side door, the pistol in his right hand at elbow level. Behind him a black horse stood "tied to the ground."

The pistol bellowed twice, sending lead into Terras's. With sight of Charley Ponnell, Sheriff Wall whipped out his Colt and Burr ignored his—to draw with the smooth speed of long experience the carbine from its scabbard. Ponnell was almost at the black horse now. His head swung far right, toward the pair of them. His pistol flicked their way. Burr saw the smoke of a shot, and then another.

He couldn't hit a barn door from inside at that range, with a cutter! was his flashing thought as the Winchester came up to his shoulder. Then—all things coming at once—

There was the *whang!* of metal striking metal. The pintos jumped sideways and one tried to cakewalk on his hind legs. He cannoned into King and the sorrel stumbled. Burr heard the sheriff's oath of heartfelt fury as he snatched at the saddle horn and cleared his feet of the stirrups and both heard and felt the *rap!* of the bullet that plowed through his hat crown and ruffled his hair.

He was on the ground, then, jumping away from King, bringing up the carbine again. Ponnell had flung himself into the saddle and leaned far forward to get his dangling reins. Burr snapped down the lever, snapped it up again, and squeezed the trigger as he caught the black's head in his sights.

With the shot—and before he could fire again—the little horse crumpled as if his legs were melting. He came sideways and down. Ponnell was pinned beneath him, on Burr's side of the horse. He worked furiously to clear himself but Burr, mounting without touching stirrups, yelled a warning.

He rode warily up to his prisoner, saw Ponnell's dropped Colt on the ground ten feet from the dead horse, and grinned as he looked at the vicious, twisted face.

"Charley," he said cheerfully, "I do declare, I never saw you looking better! Something bothering you, cowboy? Oh, I see! The li'l horse. If you'll stay right where you are, Charley, old-timer, I'll see if I can't help you out. Yes, siree, Bobuell! I'll do more: I'll see that you get to your friends so's not to be lonesome—you know, the Hoys. A' right, Sheriff—got him covered? I'll see what we can do about his sad, sad case."

He jammed the carbine back into the scabbard, got down his rope and, as the customers of Terras came cautiously out to watch, tossed a small loop over Ponnell's saddle horn, dallying the riata short, almost directly over the tightened loop. King pulled steadily and Ponnell rolled clear, to stand sullenly with lifted hands at the sheriff's grim order.

Burr searched him deftly and found only a stock-knife upon him. The Terrases, father and son, stood like two grinning idols by the buckboard to tell their brief story.

"He thought that all feared him," Juan Terras said sardonically. "So he thought it easy to rob the little monte game. But Miguel Aranda had been drinking my new tequila, which is very strong, and so he was brave enough to throw a bottle at Charley. That made others brave to throw many bottles and benches; and so he went backward through the door and from it shot at us and —*se acabo! Concluido!* That is all. But when I saw your horses jump and Don Burr's horse stumble and his hat struck—*Chihuahua!* It was in my mind that we had business for the coroner!"

"Slug hit the tongue and the horses must've been nicked by splinters," the sheriff told Burr. "You know, you certainly had Ranger luck that time. If King hadn't made you duck low, that one that got your John B. would just about have bored you plumb center. Instead, you can tell Cap' Ladd you made a plumb clean-up of the Hoy gang."

"Say!" Burr grunted, quite ungratefully. "Do I need to

help herd him to Blanco? If I thought that—"

"Nah! We'll shackle him and cuff him and one of the boys here—that'll be you, Pancho Bacal—can ride in back with a shotgun. Huuh! What you joined together, Burr—that's Charley and me—it ain't likely to be tore asunder none."

"Then I'm glad I decided not to send you in cold pork instead of live pig, Charley," Burr told the prisoner generously. "So long, everybody—you, specially, Miggy; for blamed if I don't begin to wonder about you—"

When he drew in King before the Three-Bars kitchen door he had to force the mournful expression with which he faced Lou. It came to him, also, to hope that sour, pious Ad Barron had not happened to hear him chanting *Lulu Gal* as he rode up. Ad always put the worst face on everything and the fact that he had been singing only the white-washed verses of that wicked song would hardly be believed by Deacon Barron.

"Sheriff sent me over," he told Lou, who was watching him with dark eyes narrowed, face as blank as his own. "It was like this—"

Briefly he told her of the trouble in San Andres and she listened with no change of manner. Ad Barron came to stand beside her and, if his lined face showed no particular pleasure, Burr thought that it was no more vinegary than usual.

"Must've took your time coming from the S," he said sourly. "'Course, Tres Jacales—Terras's place—was on the road. Thought you aimed to hang and rattle on that scoun'el Charley Ponnell's trail, way us old Indian-fighting Rangers used to do—huh?"

"I—I did stop at Tres Jacales," Burr confessed meekly. "At Terras's place, too, Mister Barron. It—well, about Charley Ponnell it was. He wanted some money to take out of the country with him and—he tried holding up the place and I collected him and he's on the way to town, now, sheriff riding herd. So I reckon my detail's cleaned up. Nothing more to do in Blanco. I—well, I reckon I'll be pulling out right away. It'd be mighty nice to take in

the dance tonight, for last thing—”

“I wouldn’t want to miss it, either,” Lou said hesitantly, examining the tip of King’s left ear. “If you haven’t asked anybody to go, Burr—”

Miggy— Burr was addressing the vaquero mentally — you have busted your lifelong record. Yes, sir! This is one time you somehow told the truth.

Later, riding into Blanco by the Long Road in Ad Barron’s new buckboard, dancing with Lou until one of the morning, riding out of town with her in the friendly darkness, Burr found his thoughts entirely pleasant—however jumbled.

Lou sighed and leaned against him. Burr’s arm went around the slim shoulders and drew her closer still. He bent to her face.

“Why—Burr!” she cried. “You— I—I thought you never were going to kiss me! You acted like—as bashful as you used to be. Remember how we used to ride together, and—?”

“Haven’t forgotten a thing. But it did look a lot like you’d forgotten everything. When you didn’t give me a chance to ask you to go to the dance—and I rode King to a lather getting to the Bars the minute I could leave the Tees—”

“I waited and waited. Then I wondered if you were even thinking about asking me—if you thought about me the way I’ve always thought about you— But it doesn’t matter now! Nothing matters, now, Burr! You didn’t mean what you said, about leaving? Just because you’ve caught Charley Ponnell? You won’t, now? You can’t!”

“Oh, I’ve got to report back in Verde. But I’ll ask Captain Ladd to discharge me. You know blame’ well leg-irons couldn’t hold me away from you, now! Trouble is, *querida*, I have got nothing in the world to show your father. If only I had four-five thousand—if only I had! You heard about Colorado Bittner?”

He told her of his hopes in that direction. “Likely the old man’ll just tell me nothing doing,” he admitted. “But I’m certainly going to put it up to him before I leave, and

put it up to him strong. One thing in my favor is I always have been good with horses and the Rocking Chair being a horse ranch has got to have that kind of man. If only the Hoys and Charley Ponnell had been train robbers or bank robbers with rewards on 'em, instead of rustlers—Luck's a funny thing—"

He laughed grimly—then thought of his day to the present moment came to soften him. "But I've certainly had my share, *querida*, since I landed here this time. I wouldn't trade with any man in the world! I was just thinking how things have run the last three-four years for Sergeant Howe and me. I've got the best record for settling cases I've had—like this one, here. But no matter how hard-case my men are, there never is a nickel reward on 'em! Howe—why, every time he brings in a hairpin for raising Cain in a saloon, the fellow turns out to be wanted five hundred dollars' worth, somewhere. He's made eighteen hundred, just last year."

But, having kissed her at the Three-Bars door and put the team away and got from Ad Barron almost a friendly—because not unfriendly—word, Burr rode King toward Sad Woman Pass in contented humor. Going through the first light of dawn with cottontails and jack rabbits jumping up ahead of King and the little wind ruffling greasewood and mesquite, Burr told himself that if Colorado Bittner balked, something else would turn up—for he would turn it up!

When he awakened, near noon, on the Circle-S, Maria told him that the Sills had not come back from town. Nor had Mig' returned from Tres Jacales. She gave Burr steak and eggs and coffee in the kitchen. He went out to the front gallery and settled in a great hickory chair to smoke and doze and wait for Frio's coming with the mail. He was jerked out of sleep by shrill yells from the kitchen and got up to run that way, drawing his Colt.

Maria cowered between stove and wall. She said that Mig' had come back very drunk, threatening to cut her heart out. He had run out again, brandishing his knife.

"I will find him," Burr promised. "But, now, since he

has not cut you, I think that he will fall asleep and forget it. You should not give him so much reason for jealousy, Maria. You smile too much at the men. But I will find him and take the dagger."

He went out to the corrals and called Mig' without getting a reply. It was the same in the two-room 'dobe house of Mig' and Maria, and in the other buildings. He found only the *grulla* horse which Mig' had ridden, unsaddled, beside King in the corral. He was at the side of the house when Maria yelled again, then rushed around the corner and flung herself at him, to catch him around the neck with both arms and cling and cry out that she feared for her life.

"Stop it, *tontita!*" Burr commanded wearily. "He's not going to hurt you. I won't let him touch you. I swear, I'll do some of the cutting around here, myself—but I'll use a sticky quirt. Come on, now, Maria! Let's go back and get him out of the kitchen and—"

"No, no, no! I will stay with you—I will not go back while he has still that dagger."

"Come!" he said irritably, trying to loosen her arms, watching the corner of the house where Mig' might be expected to appear. "I tell you—"

Then he heard the sharp sound behind him, like hands clapped together. He whirled that way and once more Ad Barron cracked the whip over his buckboard team. They spun on the soft ranch road and went at the gallop toward the gate. But not before Burr saw Lou sitting rigidly beside her father—saw her furious face. The buckboard took the turn into Blanco Road almost on two wheels and the team raced on toward town.

Maria had seen, too. She looked up at Burr and shook her head. But he pulled away from her, not listening to the soft Spanish words of regret. He took a long step toward the corral, bent on saddling King and riding hell-for-leather after the buckboard. Then he stopped. Very well he knew father and daughter. This was not the time to try explaining to Lou the flashing-tempered, Ad the sour and suspicious, that he had not been making open

and scandalous love to that pretty little fool.

He gave over, also, the thought of explaining to Mig'—quirt in hand—his opinion of the Aranda family troubles. Instead, he went back to the gallery and sat there moodily until Frio Sills and his wife drove in with a buyer for the Circle-S bulls. Frio handed him a letter from Captain Ladd, but did not trail Mrs. Sill and the fat, red buyer. Instead, he stood hesitantly beside Burr like a man embarrassed—and uncertainty of any sort was so strange to him that Burr frowned.

"Uh—Burr," Frio said at last, "I met Lou and old Ad in town. I—well—they sent a message to you."

"Huh? Message? Lou sent me a message? Well! What was it? *Amor de dios!* Don't stand there boggling, Frio—"

"It was from the both of 'em. In fact, more from Ad than from Lou. It was— Burr, what've you been tangling with that o'n'ry old hoot-owl about, anyhow? And Lou? Why, last night at the fandango seemed to me you two looked like you was all primed to ram a spoke into Alf Quern's marrying-wheel and step out double and—"

"What did they say?" Burr demanded furiously.

"Not to set your foot on the Bars again! That was Ad. Lou—" Frio's rugged face was honestly concerned as he looked down at Burr and shook his head "— you know how she looks when she's just so *blame'* mad she can't find words scorchy enough—she says: 'Never in his life again! Never! And that will be too soon for me, you tell him I said, Friol' Now, Burr—"

"It was Maria and Mig'," Burr told him, then explained shortly. "Mig's gone again. At least, I think I heard him busting down the timber a spell back. So—"

"It's certainly tough luck," Frio told him sympathetically. "But after Lou kind of cools off— Tell you! Le' me talk to her, tomorrow or next day. Maybe I can make her see straight—"

"I'll talk to her myself, tonight. To old Ad, too! They stay in town? Didn't? Well, then! Cap'n Ladd says for me to come on in. So I'll be high-tailing tomorrow. But nobody is going to run Burr Daley like a yellow dog without

giving him a chance to say his li'l piece! After I've said it, they—she can do as she's a mind to. Ah—*nombre del diablo!* Luck!”

He rammed his hands into trousers pockets, feeling for that silly Yaqui charm. It was in neither pocket, nor in his shirt pockets. He looked at the ground, walked to the corner of the house, along it to where he had stood with Maria, then to the corrals and back to the kitchen. When he had retraced every step taken since coming back from the Three-Bars, he stood scowling. Then—

“Ah! I'm crazy as a hoot-owl, myself!” he grunted. “What could that fool thing do, one way or the other? Sheriff'd sent Alf off to San Andres before I ever saw it. Charley Ponnell made his plan to stick up the monte game because it looked like an easy touch. Lou told me she'd been waiting for me— All the luck in that thing was Mig's: it made *him* ten dollars.”

He was grimly quiet through supper. Afterward he went out to saddle King. He lifted a hand to the group on the gallery and rode toward Trés jacales. King's hoofs fell softly on the sandy road and he came to the corner of Terras's unnoticed. Voices in the darkness pulled his head toward the side wall and in the pale light from a small, high window he saw Mig' and another Mexican.

“—who gave it to me before he died last month,” Mig' was saying as he held out his hand to the other man. “Once, many years ago, this talisman belonged to the Second Chief of the Eight Yaqui Villages—”

King jumped as at a runaway steer. Burr leaned and snatched the bit of metal from Mig's extended palm. The *vaquero*, with one look upward, howled as if the ghost of the Yaqui chief had breathed upon him. He lunged past the gaping villager and, still howling, vanished in the darkness. Burr caught his saddle horn and began to laugh gaspingly. He was still laughing when, a hundred yards along the road to Sad Woman Pass, he dropped the Yaqui charm into his shirt pocket.

Somehow the affair had pulled him out of gloominess. He rode up to the gate in Ad Barron's house lot quite

cheerfully. Lou had a temper hung in the middle, of course; few knew that better than himself. But, also, she cooled down quickly. Old Ad was different, but—

Burr stopped King and looked at the front windows that made yellow rectangles in the long wall. A moving light at the corrals told of someone busy there. Ad? One of the cowboys? He hoped that it was Ad!

King walked up closer and Burr swung off, to drop the split-reins and go noiselessly afoot up to the front gallery. He crossed the tiled floor of it and stooped, to look under the down-drawn shade that did not entirely mask the window.

Two men, strangers to him, stood by the great fireplace. The squat, dark one was talking out of an angry face. The lanky redhead seemed to be laughing at him. Burr got his ear close to the glass and the dark man's words carried to him:

"—Plain nitwittedness! Just like you done at Laredo that time. I'm still packing a slug from that crazy play and I tell you I don't want no more! Come on, now! Leave her tied up and let's climb into the middle of them fast horses of Barron's and split the breeze for the Bravo. Come on!"

"We'll do that little thing," the redhead told him, grinning. "But Miss Purteness'll be one of Pappy's *sangrefinos* with us. Why, likely we'll see them Bravo *bosques* right ahead of us before old sher'f, he figures out we even come this way. Now you slide down to the c'ral and help Fingers shift our hulls and put the gal's on a good one. Why, fellow! Outside of her suiting me to a T, she'll maybe do fine for life insurance to all of us: *Segur' Miguel*, fellow! Suppose they was to come up behind us—think they'd do much shooting knowing she was a-bringing up the drag? Slide, fellow, slide!"

Burr waited no longer at the window. He went quickly to another at the far end of the gallery, one opening upon Ad's bedroom. He hooked nails under the sash and lifted it, slipping over the sill, and stood with Colt out, listening. Except for a stripe of light upon the floor, showing the door into the front room, this room was utterly dark. But

to him came the sound of harsh breathing. He got matches from a pocket, and squatted; with left hand he rasped a match-head upon the floor, turning his head away from the flare of it. Two yards from him he saw Lou's white face, dark eyes wide and glaring where she lay upon the floor, tied like a bundle. Beyond her was another tied figure—a man, that one.

He came to his feet and jerked out the little flame. To the girl's gasping whisper he answered with one word, his name. Then he crossed quickly to the door, turned its knob very slowly, then flung the door open to crash against the wall on his left. He stood framed in the doorway, facing the trio by the fireplace—for a big, towhaired youngster had joined the redhead and the squat, dark man.

"Yup! Yup!" Burr snarled at them. "Grab your ears!"

The towhaired boy began to raise his hands, gaping stupidly at Burr. But the others had been standing with hands close to gun butts. They pulled their Colts fast and Burr let his hammer drop as it covered the redhead, thumb-jerked it, and sent his second slug at the dark man. A bullet burned his neck as the redhead's pistol dropped and he bent to recover it. But the dark man had spun with the impact of that second slug. He took two long steps toward the center of the room, his back to Burr, then fell flat upon his face with arms outflung.

The towhaired youngster had changed his mind. He drew his gun and, mouth half open and lifting to one side, fired at Burr, who was shooting at the redhead—and hitting him. Burr staggered with the shock of the bullet in his chest. Touch of the door frame steadied him and he walked in on the man. Another shot from the towhaired one's gun, then he jumped for the door beyond the fireplace, yelled as Burr's bullet struck him, and went down to a knee.

Burr went grimly on, shifting his gun from right to left hand. The redhead, too, had a wound in the gun arm. Hunkered on the hearth, leaning for support upon the chimney breast, he had got his dropped gun in left hand

and was lifting it as if it were almost too heavy to raise. Burr found the lean, reckless face blurring a little now.

"Drop it!" he commanded thickly. "Ah-h!"

For the redhead had got his Colt up and, breathing hard and noisily, was leveling it. Burr fired his last shell and the redhead went into a huddled sprawl that made him look like a dead frog, before he slid sideways to the hearth.

Burr raked the Colt away from the limp hand and looked at the towhaired man. He lay on his side, now, across the threshold of that door he had so nearly got through. His gun was on the floor beside him and he gripped his leg above the knee with both hands while he groaned in agony.

Burr reholstered his empty pistol, stooped very carefully to keep from falling, got the man's Colt, and straightened with the same effort. He turned, then, to look at the redhead and the sprawling body of the squat, dark man. The body twitched—

As Burr stared through the haze that was thickening, the dark man lifted himself on propping hands, twisted his head, then sagged again. Burr went at lurching step toward him, tried to squat, dropped to the floor, sitting. The room seemed darker, though he could see the lighted lamp. His whole right side ached. He belted the Colt he had been holding, got the one the dark man had used, and tried to get up.

"All right, then!" he told himself irritably, when he only sagged instead of rising. "You'll crawl if you can't walk."

He hitched himself across the floor toward Ad Barron's bedroom. With every heave of his body it was as though a hammer struck his chest. Someone began to call his name—but with furious additions. He looked toward Ad's door.

"If it wasn't—I know he wouldn't say words like that—I'd swear it was old Ad!" he said.

It was Ad, hitching himself into the lighted room. Burr let his pistol go and somehow found his knife, somehow

cut the lariat that was wound about Ad's arms. After that—

It seemed to him that Ad was talking a lot. He clucked reprovably, without opening his eyes.

"Cut out—that bad language!" he grunted. "Shame on you, Mister Barron. And—have *you* been feeding me—liquor?"

"Come out of it, cowboy!" Sheriff Wall called urgently. "Come on, now! Nothing wrong with you but a hole in your shoulder. I'd trade my rheumatism for it this minute—specially if I'd laid out Red Upton and Fingers Flint and Breed Jet Colson—"

"Huh?" Burr whispered. "Red Upton? That New Mexico *buscadero malo*? And—and Breed Jet, too?"

He blinked against the light. Faces were above him, and after a little time he could identify the sheriff, Ad Barron, several Blanco men, and—Alf Quern. All were grinning at him—except Alf. Burr moved a little on his pillow and a hand, certainly not a man's hand, was laid gently upon his forehead.

"Yeh, Red and Breed Jet and Fingers. They hit the Blanco bank's evening and sneaked out. But I never got fooled by the fake trail they laid down and I was right close behind 'em with this posse. But they'd have got off, if you hadn't smoked 'em up. Looks like they'll all live to make shoes down at Huntsville, too, cowboy. You shot 'em up *just* bad enough. Made yourself six-seven thousand, too, what I remember about the rewards. Certainly had a lucky streak today."

Burr heard him without halting his effort to identify the hand on his forehead. He twisted his head and Lou leaned to look down at him—and smile.

"Luck," he said slowly. "Yeh, I certainly have had it—have got it!"

He felt clumsily in his shirt pocket, got out the little charm, and held it close to his eyes, turning it over, smiling. Then he stared frowningly at it.

"That lying scoundrel!" he breathed. "Mig' Aranda, I ought to quirt you clean across the county. This is not the

one I had, that I scratched my initials on! Why— Well, it certainly worked out as well as if Old Second Chief himself had hung it onto me. *I don't need a better charm!*"

He reached up and got Lou's hand.



By Henry Herbert Knibbs

The Rat's Nest

IT WAS NEARING SUNDOWN when Young Joe Hardesty, on his way from Bowdry to the Mebbysso mine, finally reached the Pinnacles. As he sat his horse, gazing at the gaunt desert spires which marked the gateway to the badlands, his eye happened to light on a bundle of interwoven sticks nestled between two high rocks like a tumbleweed that had settled down for life. Mr. Pack Rat was smart, locating his wickiup where the desert wind wouldn't tear it to pieces. Mr. Pack Rat was also a nuisance 'round camp—stealing bits of soap, matches, a candle, or anything he could make away with. Stole things just for the hell of it. Some folks were like that. In Mr. Pack Rat's case you set fire to his nest. But shucks! This old camp thief wasn't bothering anybody, out here in the badlands. About to ride on, Young Joe's gaze was caught by a metallic glitter. He dismounted and picked up a bright new .30-.30 cartridge. Had he found a gold watch out here in the desert, 20 miles from nowhere, he could hardly have been more surprised.

Pack rats never traveled far from their nest. But human rats, like the gang that had recently tried to rob the Bowdry bank, moved around considerable. Smoked out of Bowdry after a hot gun fight, and leaving a litter of empty .30-.30 shells on the street, along with a belt partly filled with soft-nosed ammunition, the gang had made for the Blue Range country. A few days later a report came in that they had stolen some horses from Old Man Orpington after shooting him down in his cabin doorway. The outlaws were next heard from in Grant, where they robbed the general store and made an easy getaway. Since then the gang had not been heard from. It was rumored that they had made for Old Mexico. It was also

rumored that Tonto Charley was riding with them. But Young Joe didn't believe it. Tonto might have come back to Arizona, but he never would have stood for the killing of Orpington. Orpington and he were old friends.

Joe tucked the shell into his pocket, telling himself that someone riding through the badlands had dropped it. Nevertheless, he decided to look around a little before he watered his horse at the desert spring below. Crawling to the top of the ridge, he peered down. Long, tapering shadows of the Pinnacles lay across the sandy basin like giant fingers. Near the spring was a mound of dead ashes. There was no one in sight and no sign of a camp.

Joe held onto his hat as a gust of wind swept across the ridge and spiraled up in a whirling haze of sand. The wind subsided. He rubbed the dust from his eyes. Shucks! The afternoon heat had got him to imagining things. That faint sound behind him—that was only Shingles shifting a leg to rest himself.

"Looking for somebody?"

Joe turned his head, stared at the narrow-faced man on the roan horse. The muzzle of the carbine lying across the man's legs shone like a questioning eye.

"My pardner said he would pull into the water hole yonder about sundown," said Joe. "He was comin' from Bowdry."

"Always lay on your belly when you're looking for him?"

Joe got to his feet. "I was lyin' down to keep out of the wind. Seems like he ain't around anywhere, so I reckon I'll be on my way."

The man on the roan took some loose tobacco and a brown paper from his pocket and curled a cigarette with his left hand. A cowpuncher usually curled a one-fisted smoke with his right. And cowhands drifting through the country seldom packed rifles. Joe began to feel pretty grim.

"Bedrock," declared the narrow-faced man, "ain't been in Bowdry for quite a spell. How come you headed for the Pinnacles instead of keeping to the foothill road?"

The narrow-faced man lighted his cigarette, again using his left hand. His voice, his rig, his spurs all said he was a Texan. Yet he seemed to know the country and knew Bedrock by name.

"I left town late," said Joe. "Took the cutoff to save time."

"Saving time monkeying around that pack rat's nest yonder?"

Joe's eyes snapped. "Hell! Can't a fella look at a rat's nest? I was goin' to touch a match to it, like anybody would."

"Out of matches?"

Joe began to get hot under the collar. No matter what he said, the Texan was always one jump ahead. Joe drew the .30-.30 shell from his pocket. "This here is what I was lookin' at."

The narrow-faced man glanced at the bright shell. "What do you make of it?" he said easily.

Joe turned the cartridge over in his fingers, fumbled it, purposely dropped it. He stooped as if to recover it. As he came up he kicked the roan horse in the chest. The horse reared and bolted for the open desert. Joe made a running jump for his own horse, and spurring over the ridge, swept down the steep trail into the basin. Behind the high rock wall bordering the spring he could stand off the Texan—drop him from the saddle if he was fool enough to follow.

As he flashed round the shoulder of the wall, Joe's pony Shingles set himself up with a snort. Three men stood near their horses as if ready to mount. A big, beefy, round-faced man with an eye like a blue marble stepped forward and signaled to Joe to dismount. A glance told Young Joe what the men were. He stepped down.

"Boys," the beefy man gestured, "meet Young Hardesty. Folks say he is a tough kid. Now I'm wonderin' just how tough he is?"

"If I had a gun on me," said Joe, "you wouldn't be doin' any wonderin'!"

One of the men laughed. The big man swung his right.

Joe dropped, staggered up, and came back at him like a wildcat. The beefy man swung again. Joe went down in a heap. As he lay half conscious, he was aware of the faint sound of voices and an answering halloo from the ridge. That would be the Texan. Then Joe heard someone say, "What you aim to do with him, Brace?"

Sick, dizzy, Joe crawled over to the wall and sat with his back against the rock, staring at the figures moving to and fro in the dusk. Firelight flickered up, played on faces weather-seamed, unshaven, on battered Stetsons, and belts heavy with shells.

The men were wolfing down grub and talking in low tones. A man rose from beside the fire and stalked over to Joe. It was the Texan who offered him a cup of hot coffee. Surprised by this unexpected attention and conscious of the lump on his jaw, Joe drank the coffee. He began to feel better.

"Looks like you made a mistake for yourself," said the Texan.

"You mean headin' for the Pinnacles? If I'd 'a' knowed what was here, I would sure rode wide of this rats' nest."

A smile touched the Texan's hard mouth. He glanced over his shoulder. "I ain't got no call to grease your wagon wheels. But I saw you stand up to Brace. I kind of liked that. What I mean, the boys are on the prod. They don't like visitors, nohow. If you do any talking, do it through your teeth." The Texan turned and strode back to the fire.

Joe realized that he was in a mighty tight pocket. Figuring a way out of it was like a sum in arithmetic. The idea was to do your figuring right and not worry too much about the answer. Apparently the outlaws had not considered it worth-while to put him under guard. They had his horse and his gun, and there was no way out of the rock-walled basin except the ridge trail. To reach that he would have to pass near them. But if a fellow were to crawl along the base of the wall and could manage to get into the corral without being seen— With a glance toward the group round the fire, Joe sank down and began to worm his way toward the horses.

He had almost reached the corral when the argument round the fire ceased and a figure rose and stalked toward the spot he had recently left. "Where in hell is he?" the man called out.

"Take a look at the horses," Brace called back, and rising, he started toward the corral. He all but stumbled over Young Joe in the darkness. Joe jumped up and dashed headlong into the man who had been sent to fetch him.

The fire had died down to a blur of red embers. Squatting between his captor and the Texan, Joe glanced quickly from face to face—the Texan, Brace, the short, thick man with a bristle of beard, and the man whom Brace called Hargis. They, in turn, gazed at the smoldering fire. Brace rolled a cigarette. "Kid," he said casually, "I figure we don't need you around here any longer."

Surmising that this was a bait, Joe said quite casually, "I was goin' to bush here tonight, anyhow."

The man called Hargis laughed. Brace blew smoke through his nose. "Just how do you figure this outfit?"

Young Joe straddled the question. "I ain't been doin' any figurin'. Mebby you fellas don't know who you are, either."

Again Hargis laughed. "He's got you on the run, Brace."

Joe wasn't fooled by their easy-going attitude. Just one bobble and they would put him away for keeps. Brace, who seemed to be running the outfit, was a bully. Most bullies had a yellow streak. And yellow was a whole lot more dangerous than plain red.

"Seein' you were figurin' to bush here," Brace spoke as if the thought had just occurred to him, "how would you like to throw in with us for a spell? We could use you."

Joe hesitated. First Brace had said they didn't need him around there any longer. Now Brace could use him. There was something fishy about that. "You mean ride with you fellas?"

Brace nodded.

"I dunno," said Joe. "I'd kind of like to think it over."

The man called Stubby spat into the fire. "I ain't for it."

The kid ain't either. He's just stringin' you along."

Joe flashed a hard look at Stubby. "Who's runnin' this talk, anyhow?"

"I'm runnin' it," said Brace.

"Then I'm talkin' to you." Young Joe made a cigarette. "About joinin' up. I'm kind of tired of pushin' a wheelbarrow and swingin' a pick. Anyhow, the Mebbyso is peterin' out. Now if all you fellas was to vote me in, regular—" Joe fumbled in his pocket, frowned. He turned to Hargis. "Gimme a match, will you?"

As Hargis, squatting next to him, raised his arm to reach in his shirt pocket, Young Joe snatched the outlaw's gun from the holster. In a flash Joe was on his feet, facing Brace and the man called Stubby across the fire.

"Hell, kid! You didn't have to do that," said Brace.

"Like you beatin' me down. But let that ride. Right now I'm collectin' them votes."

"Go get your horse," Brace waved his hand, "and call it a day. Nobody's goin' to bother you."

Again Brace had changed front. Young Joe knew that it wouldn't do for him to back down now. "I'm stayin' right here. What you goin' to do about it?"

The men stared at Brace. It was mighty plain that the kid meant business. Moreover, it was now a personal matter—something for Brace and Young Joe to settle. Brace's heavy face flushed. "You win," he said grudgingly. "Put up that gun."

Young Joe had made good, temporarily. He knew his luck hung by a mighty thin thread. He didn't trust Brace, not for a minute. But it wouldn't do to let Brace know it. "All right, Brace." Young Joe's tone was level, business-like. "I had to kind of talk you into givin' me a job. Now I got it, all I want to know is where in hell the grub is at."

"I told you he was as good a man as you are," said Hargis, grinning at Brace. "The grub," continued Hargis, "is in the cache this side of the corral. Wait a minute. Here's that match."

"Thanks, pardner. I come right near forgettin' it. Here's your gun."

Aware that they were watching him, Joe turned his back on the group and strode over to the cache. He had voted himself into this rats' nest. Just now the rats were sticking together. But when it came to a showdown, it would be each rat for himself. If he could manage to hang on till then—

In the shallow cave in the rock wall he stripped a gunnysack from a shoulder of beef, hacked off a chunk. When he returned to the fire, he noted that the man Stubby had disappeared—probably taking his turn as lookout up on the rim. Hargis and the Texan were talking about the Tonto Valley cattle war. Brace lay near the fire, his eyes closed. Joe gave his attention to the skillet and coffee pot. The Texan rose and walked toward the corral.

"Where in hell did you get this meat?" said Joe. "Off a bosky?"

Hargis chuckled. "Thought you was tough." The outlaw glanced up at the starlit sky. "Pretty night," he said, yawning. "Reckon I'll turn in."

Hargis had gone toward the eastern end of the basin. Shortly afterward Brace got up and disappeared in the opposite direction. The man called Stubby was standing guard on the rim. The Texan was bedded down near the horses. In case of a surprise the outlaws wouldn't be caught bunched together. Joe took the skillet and coffee pot to the cache. As no one was around to warn him, he walked over to the corral. That still shape was the Texan. Apparently he was asleep. Joe slipped over the wall and stole toward his pony, Shingles.

The Texan sat up. Starlight glinted on the barrel of his carbine. "Brace is up on top with Stubby," he said pointedly. "No sense crowding your luck."

"I reckon two of 'em would be one too many," said Joe, "seein' my old Sharps is a single shot. Now if I had that little gun you're holdin' on me—"

"How long do you figure to stick with the outfit?"

Joe hesitated. The question came as a surprise. "If a posse was to ride into this here basin and start shootin',"

he said finally, "I would be behind a rock whangin' at the posse. Because why? Because me bein' here, they would put me out as quick as they would any of this bunch. But if we-all was ridin' the ridges, and I took a notion to change my luck, that would be different."

"You please me most to death," said the Texan. "Right now you better bed down alongside me, here—lay on your belly and cover your back with your hand. We're short on blankets."

Joe was awakened by the sound of voices. Round about the giant pinnacles towered into the morning sky. The Texan was filling some gunnysack morrals with corn. There was an extra horse in the corral—a bay, sweat-marked as if he had come a long way.

Joe rose and stretched, cocked his hat over his eye, and bowlegged up to the breakfast fire, where a tall, heavy man in jeans and rowdy and wearing Chihuahua spurs was talking with Hargis and Brace.

"Sit in and eat," said the tall man. He slanted a quick look at Young Joe. "Brace, here, was tellin' me you joined up last night."

"He ought to know," said Joe.

Hargis chuckled. "He beat Brace to the draw. With my gun, at that."

Again the tall man glanced at Young Joe, a question in his eyes. Joe's mind was a riot of questions. Why had Tonto Charley pretended he didn't know him? Why had he left Mexico? What game was he playing? Young Joe filled a tin cup with coffee, blew on it, stared into the fire. Not many years ago he and Tonto Charley had been in some pretty tight corners together. If Tonto pretended he didn't know him there was a mighty good reason for it.

"Lost your appetite, kid?" said Hargis.

Joe grinned. "Not any. Howcome, I lost a friend a spell ago. I was thinkin' of him."

"Tough hombre—like you?" sneered Brace.

"Hell, no! Folks called him Sweet William. His business

was plantin' stiff's."

"Don't let your feelin's get bogged down too deep," said Tonto Charley, grinning.

Joe finished eating, took his plate and cup to the spring. Tonto Charley had dropped a hint. But why only a hint when they were old friends? There was something mighty queer about the whole business.

Joe was in the cache replacing his plate and cup when he heard someone shuffle up to the corral, heard the Texan's easy drawl: "I'd kind of hate to beef him, at that. But with this here job coming up—"

"It ain't only the job," said Brace. "Reckon you didn't see him and Tonto lettin' on they didn't know each other, a spell ago."

"Would Tonto make the ride to tell you Collins and his posse is over in the Blue Range if he wasn't all right? What's biting you? We're heading for Bowdry. And the sheriff is out of town."

"A couple of years ago," said Brace, "I seen Tonto and the kid ride into Bowdry and clean out the Silver Dollar, leavin' three men on the floor. But this mornin' they don't know each other."

"That don't sour my stomach any," declared the Texan. "What I mean—if Tonto and him are friends, the kid ain't going to carry a bone to no peace officers. Hell, Brace, you act like you're getting gun-shy."

Brace and the Texan were out of sight round the shoulder of the wall. Joe slipped out of the cache and walked over to the breakfast fire where Tonto Charley was squatting on his heels, talking with Hargis. Tonto flicked his cigarette into the fire and rose. "Hargis, here, was tellin' me you was obliged to borrow his gun last evenin'."

"Not havin' my old sawed-off Sharps handy," said Joe.

Tonto Charley laughed. "That ain't a gun. That's a old tunnel lead mine. Here." Tonto unbuckled his belt and handed the short, heavy gun and holster to Young Joe. "Next time you won't have to borrow off Hargis."

Joe swung the belt on and buckled it. A fellow just couldn't figure Tonto. But anybody that took him for a

fall just because his name was Tonto was riding a lame horse.

Hargis looked puzzled. "I didn't know you and the kid was friends."

Tonto Charley's eyes, under heavy, ragged brows, leveled to Hargis's face. "Me, I ain't got any friends. What I mean—I don't need any."

Young Joe grinned. You never could figure Tonto. One minute he would be joshing you. The next he would be telling you where to head in. Was he telling Hargis where to head in?

"Come on over to the corral," said Tonto, turning to Joe. "Brace ain't seen you in your new clothes."

Joe would have given considerable to have had a word with Tonto Charley alone. But the men were all in the corral now, taking up slack cinches, and getting ready to leave the basin. Tonto Charley whistled as he stepped round his horse. Noting Joe's "new clothes," Brace glanced at the Texan, then at Tonto Charley. Brace turned to see Young Joe grinning at him.

Tonto called out, "Hey, Brace, got any extra thirty-thirties?"

"I heard tell there's a belt full of 'em in Bowdry," stated Joe. "Fella must 'a' been mighty scared to jump through his belt and leave it behind like that."

Brace stiffened, glared at Young Joe.

Tonto stepped up to him. "About them shells, Brace?"

Brace shook his head. Whistling, Tonto strode back to his horse.

"We'll hit Bowdry long about six this evenin'," said Brace as they moved toward the ridge trail.

"I'm figurin' to send Stubby and the kid in ahead to look around before we get busy."

"Sure!" Tonto laughed. "You would do that."

This undercurrent of animosity didn't escape Young Joe. Brace was running the outfit. Yet Tonto seemed to have some hold on the gang. If the rats started quarreling among themselves— Young Joe grinned. They were on top of the ridge now. As they passed the spot where

he had had his little run-in with the Texan, Joe stepped down and picked up the .30-.30 shell and stuffed it into his pocket.

When they reached the desert flat below, Tonto turned to young Joe, "We-all are headin' for Bowdry." He gestured. "Which way are you ridin'?"

"That's all settled," said Brace. "The kid is ridin' with us."

"Which way are you ridin'?" said Charley, ignoring Brace.

Joe knew perfectly well that Tonto's insistence meant considerably more than a challenge to Brace's authority. Tonto was reckless, especially when drunk. But he was sober now, knew exactly what he was doing. There was something back of it all that Joe couldn't understand. Tonto's heavy features were expressionless; his eyes unmoving were fixed on Brace.

"Why, I'm ridin' with you fellas," said Joe, as if surprised by Tonto's question.

"I was figurin' you would," said Tonto.

The outfit moved on. Hargis was muttering to himself.

Long before they reached Point of Rocks Young Joe came to the conclusion that Tonto Charley, although known throughout the territory as one of the toughest of the wild bunch, would not have deliberately encouraged him to side with this gang unless there was a mighty good reason for it. To the contrary, Tonto would be the first to warn him off. "The game," Tonto once told him, "is no good. I ain't, either. That's why I'm playing it. You stick to Bedrock and the mine."

Joe was puzzling over this apparent inconsistency when Hargis, gazing between his horse's ears, said in a low tone, "If you'd 'a' pulled your freight back there at the Pinnacles, it looks like you would 'a' sure started somethin'."

"That's what I figured," said Joe. "Say, pardner, how long has Tonto Charley been ridin' with this bunch?"

"Ask me after it rains. It's too damn hot to talk right now."

Brace and Tonto Charley were in the lead, followed by Stubby, sour-faced, silent, alone. Hargis and Young Joe rode side by side. The Texan, on his big roan, brought up the rear. Young Joe reined up, waiting for the Texan, but the Texan immediately stopped. His carbine across his legs, he sat his horse, a lean statue of vigilance.

"Hell!" snorted Joe, "I was just figurin' on our havin' a little talk. Hargis says it's too hot."

"Same here."

Joe rode on, overtook Hargis, who seemed to have regained his usual good nature. Joe gestured toward the far peaks of the Mebbysso range. "Rainin' over yonder."

Hargis chuckled. "You're good for a laugh any time. But Tex takes his job serious. What I mean—I'd kind of hate to see your saddle empty."

"I been figurin' on keepin' it warm, ever since Tonto joined up," said Joe.

Hargis's expression changed. "Brace," he said unsmilingly, "is runnin' this outfit."

"Tell that to me after it rains," said Joe. "Right now it's too damn hot to swallow."

Slowly Point of Rocks became outlined against the western sky as the dusty cavalcade plodded across the glaring emptiness. Brace and Tonto Charley, who had been riding together during the early part of the journey, had drawn apart. Tonto was now riding beside the man called Stubby.

Speculating upon Tonto Charley's connection with the gang, Young Joe could arrive at no satisfactory conclusion. Although Tonto was capable of any kind of deviltry, in this instance he didn't seem to fit into the picture. And it was plain enough that he hadn't been with the outlaws when they made their unsuccessful attempt to rob the Bowdry bank. He was well known in Bowdry, would have been recognized, and his name mentioned. And had he been with them in the Blue Range, they wouldn't have killed Old Man Orpington. Tonto wouldn't have stood for that. Many a time Tonto had laid low in Orpington's mountain cabin when the peace officers were

looking for him. No, Tonto didn't fit into this picture. Yet here he was, apparently at home with the gang, and apparently sure of himself. That run-in with Brace now. A man with half an eye could see that Tonto Charley wasn't taking orders from Brace. And it was mighty plain that Brace didn't like him a whole lot. Even Hargis didn't seem any too glad to see Tonto around. Young Joe shrugged. Maybe when the gang reached Point of Rocks and made their final plans for the Bowdry job, whatever it was, a fellow would be able to make some plans of his own. Right now it was a case of hang and rattle.

That diamondback, coiled in the shade of that rock, yonder. He wasn't worrying any. He didn't even buzz. Had his head up, though. Wasn't asleep. More through habit than anything else, Joe pulled the gun Tonto had given him and fired. The rattler flopped and writhed. The drowsy outfit came to life in a flash. Brace, Tonto, and Stubby whirled their horses around.

"Just a rattler," the Texan called out.

Brace cursed, holstered his gun. Tonto laughed. Stubby was holding his six-shooter on Young Joe.

"Show is over," said Tonto.

A fool thing to do, shooting the rattler. Joe knew it. And he didn't especially care whether the rest of them liked it or not. He had found out something. Stubby was only waiting for an excuse to shoot him. Else why had Tonto been watching Stubby so closely? Maybe Stubby had forgotten that Tonto wore a shoulder holster. And Stubby was Brace's dog. A bad dog with a mean look and a crooked mouth. All Brace had to say was, "Take him!" and Stubby would get busy. Joe had chalked that on his slate even before they started to make the ride to Point of Rocks. But how did Tonto know it? Easy. *I'm sending Stubby and the kid in ahead*, says Brace. It was then that Tonto had caught on.

Joe boiled. At that moment he didn't care if he set off the whole bunch of fireworks. He pushed his horse up alongside the bristle-faced outlaw. "I got me one rattler this mornin'," he said, as if recounting a rather pleasing

experience. His tone dropped a note. "But he wasn't packin' a gun. And he didn't wear whiskers."

With still and curious eyes Brace, Hargis and the Texan sat their horses, watched the two. Stubby seemed hypnotized by Young Joe's rigid gaze.

A grin spread across Tonto Charley's heavy features. "It'll be cooler this evenin'," he said, lifting the reins as if about to ride on.

The tension let down. Again they all became conscious of the heat, of sun glare and shadeless reaches. Brace humped his heavy shoulders and rode on. Stubby whirled his horse viciously and followed. With an unreadable glance at Young Joe, Tonto Charley fell in behind Stubby. Reins hanging on the horn as he rode along, Hargis was carefully winding a length of string round the cracked handle of his six-shooter. "That rattler back there," he said without looking up from his task, "you sure messed him up. Now I was lookin' to see you shoot his head off neat."

Young Joe turned hot, sullen eyes on Hargis. "I ain't that good. Mebby you are."

"Hell, no! But Stubby, now—he's poison. I've seen him chuck up a two-bit piece and plug it before it hit the ground."

"I've got two bits," said Joe.

Hargis, the youngest of the outlaws, was chuckling to himself. Good-natured, good-looking, with a clear blue eye, he was always ready to laugh. Although Hargis made no pretense of being tough, Young Joe surmised that he had more real nerve than any of his fellows. Except, perhaps, the Texan. He was different again—didn't talk much, seldom smiled. Kind of cold-blooded. And mighty steady. Took more than a scare to touch him off. As for Brace and his dog Stubby, they were yellow, mean, quick to kill because they feared being killed. But there was no use borrowing trouble when you already had a lap full of it. Anyhow, there was old Tonto, chousing along right ahead—easy-going, solid, the only one that hadn't had a gun in his hand following the shooting of

the rattler.

Immediate conditions and hazards had limited Young Joe's horizon. Suddenly, as if he had reached the crest of a mountain, the horizon expanded, swept on and out, clear to the Blue Range and Old Man Orpington's cabin. Joe cursed his own stupidity. He had seen it all along—that question in Tonto's eyes. The Bowdry job was simply an excuse. Not that Tonto would lead the gang into a trap—he would be more likely to fight for them if they were cornered by a posse. Tonto was after the man who had shot Orpington down as he stood unarmed in his cabin doorway.

Young Joe shrugged. Tonto had given him a gun. Tonto had also given him a chance to get out of this mix-up back there at the Pinnacles. Tonto was counting on him. Well, he could—if he didn't count too fast.

A scum like bronze dust lay over the Point of Rocks water hole. The horses plodded across the white, crushed mud and drank. From the foothill brush a quail called complainingly in the noon heat. By common consent the outlaws drifted up into the shade of the hillside junipers. Their movements were apparently casual as they dismounted and tied their horses, yet each man, as he sat or reclined, placed himself so that he could watch his fellows. Stubby, however, left them and climbed to a high ridge north of the water hole. Point of Rocks shut off all view of the desert to the north save from the ridge.

Across from Joe, Tonto Charley squatted on his heels near Brace, who lay with his hand propping his head, his hat brim over his eyes. Hargis sat whittling a bit of broken branch. Beyond him the Texan lay on his belly, his head turned sideways, facing the others. There was no talk. Even Hargis, usually up and coming, was silent, an expectant look in his eyes. The outfit was heading for Bowdry—up to some deviltry. But that didn't account for this tense silence. Nor did the possibility of a flare-up between Young Joe and Stubby. Stubby was yonder at the ridge.

With a lookout posted and with two or three hours to loaf before setting out for Bowdry, the gang should have

been taking it easy. Heavy-set men, like Brace and Tonto, probably would have slept through the noon heat.

The heat was bad enough. But the silence was worse. Joe sat turning a long, .45 Sharps cartridge over in his fingers, contrasting it in his mind to the slender, tapered shell he had picked up at the pack rat's nest. Old-timers called the new .30-.30 a peashooter and stuck to their heavy-caliber rifles. But this outfit—even Tonto Charley—packed .30-.30's, used soft-nosed slugs. The Sharps .45 would knock a man down—stun him even if it didn't kill him. The .30-.30 soft-nose would tear a hole like a pancake where it came out. Like the slug that got Old Man Orpington. Just one shot—but that had been plenty.

Joe sat gazing at the distant figure of Stubby seated alongside a rock on the high ridge. Why didn't somebody say something? Or curl a smoke? Sometimes when a fellow wants to cover up he curls a smoke. Gives him something to do. Wondering if anyone else would follow suit, Joe rolled a cigarette. He turned to Hargis with a grin. "Say, gimme a match, will you?"

Hargis stopped whittling and with mock formality pulled his gun and offered it to Young Joe.

"I reckon it's the heat," said Joe. "I said a match."

From beneath his hat brim Brace watched this by-play. Tonto Charley had his eye on Brace. The Texan had raised his head as if listening. Hargis holstered his gun. Joe took a match from his own pocket and lighted the cigarette. His gaze drifted to the distant ridge. A few seconds ago Stubby had been sitting in the shadow of a big rock. Joe's tense gaze searched the empty ridge. Stubby had disappeared. That seemed queer. Had he seen anything suspicious he would have signaled. Had he been on his way back to camp, Joe would have seen him. It was hot, but Joe's back grew cold—every man in the outfit in sight but Stubby.

The ridge was in full view of Hargis, the Texan, and Brace. Tonto Charley, with his back toward it, wouldn't know that Stubby had left his post.

Young Joe tried to catch Tonto's eye. But Tonto was

now gazing at Brace's horse, a stocky mouse-gray, dozing in the shade of a juniper a few yards up the hillside. It was one of the horses stolen from Old Man Orpington. There had been no attempt to blot the brand. Hargis was also riding one of Orpington's horses, a sorrel with a light mane and tail. But that was no sure sign that Hargis or Brace had killed the old man. It might have been Stubby or even the Texan. Joe's gaze drifted toward the ridge. There was no sign of Stubby.

A faint roll of thunder echoed from the distant Mebyso range. The drowsy horses cocked their ears, shuffled.

"Change of weather," said Hargis.

"About time," said Tonto Charley.

"*Slicker in the bunkhouse—and rainin' like hell,*" chanted Young Joe. He was looking at Stubby's horse, which stood with ears forward expectantly. The rifle scabbard on Stubby's saddle was empty. Joe didn't recall having seen him take the rifle with him. Evidently he had. But why? On a lookout as near to camp as that a fellow didn't need a rifle. If he spotted anyone coming across the desert he wouldn't start shooting. He would slip back to camp and warn the gang. No, it wasn't natural to pack a rifle around in that heat when a fellow had a six-gun and wasn't over 50 yards from camp.

Suddenly Hargis stopped whittling and put his knife away. His face was stiff, expressionless. Young Joe rose and stretched. Stubby had been gone from the ridge 10 or 15 minutes. Again Young Joe tried to catch Tonto's eye. Tonto had turned to Brace, was staring at him in a peculiar manner, when a voice from the junipers up the slope broke the tense silence: "Hey, Brace!"

Brace sat up, leaning on his left hand. "That you, Stubby?"

"Sure it's me!" came Stubby's voice. "Three fellas are headin' up the ridge north. One of 'em is Collins. I know the buckskin he's ridin'."

The Texan was sitting up now. He and Hargis were staring hard at Tonto Charley. He had told them that the sheriff was over in the Blue range.

"Stubby," said Tonto softly, "is a damn liar."

"Tell him," snarled Brace. "He's got you covered."

It came to Young Joe in a flash. This was a frame-up to get Tonto Charley. Had Collins and his posse been heading for the ridge, Stubby would have seen them long before they reached it and would have signaled the camp.

Out of the corner of his eye, Joe watched Hargis and the Texan as Tonto Charley said slowly, "There's one man in this outfit ain't said his piece yet. He killed Bud Orpington. Somebody give him a name!"

The Texan went for his gun. Tonto Charley chopped down and let him have it. Both Hargis and Brace opened up on Tonto. Young Joe dropped Hargis with a shot through the body, swung round to throw a shot at Brace, when a rifle snarled on the hillside. Tonto Charley staggered and dropped to his knees. Joe dodged behind a juniper and came round behind Brace. "Drop it!" he cried, shoving his gun into Brace's back. Brace lowered his arm, let his gun fall to the ground.

Again the rifle snarled on the hillside. Tonto's hat jumped as if someone had jerked it from his head. "Try her again!" he cried. "You're holdin' too high."

The Texan sat forward, his arms braced wide, his eyes dull and staring. Hargis, on hands and knees, coughed, vomited. Young Joe saw Tonto Charley struggle to get up, waver and sink down. Stubby's first shot had got him. Brace had framed it all. Joe swung viciously, brought his gun barrel down on Brace's head. The Texan was on his feet. As if asleep he started to walk toward his horse. Young Joe had him covered, would have dropped him, but the Texan suddenly stopped as if listening, swayed, said something to himself, and crumpled in a heap.

Hargis now. He was out of it. Joe's face was white, his mouth tense. Too bad to have to plug Hargis. But he had had it coming. All of 'em had it coming. Tonto was done for, shot down from the brush by a killer that didn't have nerve enough to face him.

Keeping under cover of the junipers, Joe stole toward the horses. His rifle wasn't on Shingles's saddle. Stubby

had taken it, hidden it somewhere. But there was Tonto's carbine. Joe was pulling the gun from the boot when a shot from the hillside tore through the cantle of the saddle. He jerked the carbine free, and ducking, made a run for the next tree. He peered up the hillside. Stubby's .30-.30 had left no smoke. But he was up there somewhere. High enough to see the camp or any open spot below him. That would make it hard to circle and get above him.

It was a case of crawl and climb—with always the chance that Stubby would spot him from above. Joe had been at it but a few minutes when, pausing to rest, he heard the faint clatter of a rolling stone. Peering round the rock behind which he lay, he could see nothing but the green of the junipers and the bare, blazing rocks. He wiped his face on his sleeve. That spot of gray, yonder, looked mighty like the peaked crown of a Stetson. Stubby wore a gray Stetson. Hargis's was black, like Brace's. Might have been the heat waves. Or maybe the gray spot had moved a little. Yes, it had moved. The tiny, gleaming circle of a rifle muzzle showed beneath it. Joe hugged the ground, drew a careful bead between the gleam of metal and the gray above. He squeezed the trigger. The carbine was empty.

Young Joe's eyelids flickered. Someone had emptied Tonto's rifle and replaced it in the scabbard. Unaware of this, Tonto would have counted on it in a mix-up. Brace and Stubby had not given Tonto Charley even a fighting chance.

Having seen Young Joe take the empty carbine from the saddle and knowing that Young Joe couldn't reach him at that distance with a six-gun, Stubby came from behind the distant rock, stumped across an open space, and disappeared among the hillside junipers. Fumbling in his pocket, Joe took the .30-.30 he had found at the rat's nest and shoved it into the chamber.

Stubby was somewhere in that clump of junipers, slowly working across the hillside. Once he got through the clump to the west, he would be behind Young Joe, could pick him off easily. For an instant Joe thought of making

a dash back across the rock-studded stretch up which he had climbed. Probably Stubby expected him to do just that. But Stubby wouldn't expect to meet him in the clump of junipers.

Joe crouched and crawled toward their shadowy edge. Rising cautiously, he peered round. There was no sign of Stubby in that lace of sunlight and shadow—no faintest sound. Suddenly a bird left a branch and rose in the air, chattering shrilly. His gaze fixed on an opening among the trees directly ahead, Young Joe heard a faint shuffling sound, saw a low branch move. His heart jumped—steadied as the squat, gray-shirted figure of the outlaw appeared. His rifle in the crook of his arm, he stood as if listening. He raised his hand to strike a fly from his cheek.

Young Joe was tempted to drop him in his tracks. Instead, he stepped out of the shadow. With Tonto's carbine centered on Stubby's belt buckle, he said quietly, "Here you are, if you're looking for me."

A crafty light gleamed in Stubby's eyes. The kid thought he had him covered. Well, let him think so. The kid's gun was empty. Get him to press the trigger and give him the laugh. Make him sweat blood. Then let him have it.

Joe saw it all in those narrowed eyes. Stubby would torture a man—kill him slowly, grin and keep throwing lead into him. If he got a chance. Although the carbine still lay in the crook of Stubby's arm, his hand began to tighten. He would jerk the gun to his shoulder and fire. Hargis had said he was poison with a gun.

"Got you right where I want you," said the outlaw, his teeth showing under his upper lip. "Tough kid, eh? Tough—but that gun is empty."

"Any bets on it?"

A queer look flashed across Stubby's face. He had emptied the carbine himself and had put it back in the boot. What did the kid mean? The kid's mouth was set in a grin. Folks said Young Hardesty always went through to the finish. Well, this was the finish.

Young Joe saw it coming, pressed the trigger of Tonto's

carbine. The shot crashed through the silence. Stubby wilted down as if struck by lightning. His hands clutching his belly, the outlaw turned and twisted. Young Joe stood over him, watched him bend upward like a spring, then fall back. Joe wiped cold sweat from his face. This squared it for Tonto.

This—and Hargis. Too bad about Hargis. But naturally he would side with the gang. The Texan? He had as much as said he killed Old Man Orpington. Tex was a killer all right. But it was hard to believe that he shot the old man down. Now if it had been Stubby or Brace— Young Joe turned from the dead man and began to walk down the slope. He cursed himself because he felt sick. The rats had all had it coming.

Nearing the camp, Joe thought he heard voices. He had knocked Brace out—hit him hard enough to have cracked his skull. Maybe Brace had come to, was loco and talking to himself. Slipping past the horses, Joe paused at the edge of the sunlit circle in the junipers. Brace lay on his back, his hands under him. A glance told Joe they were tied. Tonto Charley was on his knees, picking bright objects from the ground. Too stunned by the sight to speak, Young Joe stood still and watched him.

Gold pieces were scattered about the clearing. Tonto's shirt was torn in front. The ends of his belt dangled. He reached for another gold piece, and cursed. He glanced up. "Come on in and sit down," he said. He picked up still another gold piece. "Have any luck?"

"Plenty," said Joe grimly.

"Heard a shot. Get another rattler?"

"Another rattler."

The Texan lay on his face near the horses. Tonto Charley read the question in Joe's eyes and nodded. "He's all through. Thought Brace was, likewise, till he started to crawl around looking for his gun. I hog-tied him."

"Where's Hargis?"

"In the brush, yonder. Reckon he's tryin' to get to the water hole." Tonto Charley was white, his eye was wild. But he continued to search for the scattered gold pieces.

Joe stepped up to him. "Listen, Charley, quit that. You're plumb crazy."

"Now you're talkin'! But this trip I got a good excuse." Tonto pulled back the edges of his torn shirt, disclosing a black and blue patch on his belly as big as a saucer. "Slug ripped my money belt all to hell. Came mighty nigh spoilin' me."

Joe stared at the black and blue patch. Stubby's shot had struck the gold packed in the money belt, ripped the belt to rags, scattered the coins, and knocked Tonto out. A soft-nosed slug might do that. A steel jacketed bullet would have gone clear through. Tonto always was a fool for luck.

Young Joe stiffened as he heard a groan. It wasn't Brace. And certainly it wasn't Tonto. Joe crossed the clearing. A few yards from the water hole he came upon Hargis, lying on his back. The young outlaw stared up at him, tried to speak. Joe fetched a canteen, gave him water.

Hargis's lips moved. "Thanks, kid," he whispered. "I guess I've got mine." He paused, his mouth twitching. "It wasn't Tex got Old Man Orpington."

"Stubby?"

"No."

"Well, it don't make no difference now, anyhow," said Joe.

"Not to me." Hargis almost grinned. "You might ask Brace for a light. I'm out of matches." A spasm of pain shook Hargis. His head fell back.

Hargis had gone out with a joke on his lips. But was it a joke? Young Joe turned and strode back to camp.

Tonto Charley had gathered up his gold pieces and was standing by his horse. "We better head for the mine," he said. "I ain't good for a hell of a lot. Feel like I been sawed in two."

"How about Brace? Leavin' him tied like that?"

"He's restin' easy. Want me to sit and hold his hand?"

"It's your party," said Joe. "I'm headin' for the Mebyso."

Skirting the foothills, they dropped down to the desert

road. Tonto glanced north and south. As they moved on, Joe said, "Did Brace know you had all that dough on you?"

"Not any. It's Mex gold. I fetched it from Chihuahua."

"Hargis—" Young Joe hesitated, "I was talkin' to him just before he cashed in. He said it wasn't Tex got Bud Orpington, or Stubby."

Tonto Charley glanced sharply at Joe. Joe's jaws were clamped tight.

"My mistake," said Tonto, reining round.

"Tonto!" cried Joe. "Hold on!"

But Tonto Charley kept grimly on his way. Sick at heart, Joe sat his horse, waiting. He heard a distant shot.

A few minutes later Tonto returned, his face a mask. "You got me wrong," he said as they rode on. "I told Brace what I came back for. I untied him and give him his gun. He didn't give Bud Orpington even that chance."

Young Joe had nothing to say. He was gazing at the distant Pinnacles, thinking of the cartridge he had picked up near the pack rat's nest.

The Lower Trail

By Ross Santee

WE NEVER KNEW how it started. Some trifling thing, I suppose. But it grew until both cowpunchers were ready to shoot on sight.

Jim had come to Arizona from Texas. Charlie was from the North. The two punchers had been friendly enough when they came to work at the outfit.

They broke horses together that summer and worked in the same corral. When it came to making a hand, there was nothing to choose between them. Both boys were plenty salty and inclined to be high-strung. If either was jealous in any way, they never showed it any.

They range-branded together that winter and slept in the same tepee. If there was any trouble between them then, we never heard of it. It wasn't until a long time after Jim quit riding for the Turtles' and went over to the Dart's that we noticed they didn't speak.

Things rocked along for a year that way. Charlie never mentioned Jim's name. Occasionally one of the punchers would drop some word in camp about something Jim had said, trifling things and said in fun, for they could see it bothered Charlie.

There's always some punchers who love a row and like to rib a fight. Some of the boys began to pack yarns into camp about things Jim had said: *Charlie couldn't ride in a wagon—Charlie would starve to death in camp if he had to ketch his own beef.*

Meaning, of course, in plain language, that Charlie was not a good rider and he was no hand with a rope. Later, we found that they were doing the same thing at the Dart's, tampin' a load into Jim.

I liked both boys myself and it bothered me. Any man with half an eye could see where things were headin'.

But when I spoke to Charlie, it didn't clear things up.

"First thing I know there's anything stickin' in Jim's craw, I meet up with him in town. I ain't seen Jim in some time. He don't speak to me. But if that's the way that hombre feels, it's all right with me."

I mentioned loose talk to Charlie, but I didn't get very far. "You know I've never said a word against him in my life," he says. "You'd better make your talk to Jim."

Not long before the showdown came, Charlie and I were both in town and we run into Jim.

"Hello," sings out Jim to me, flashin' that grin of his I always liked so well. "How's everything at the Turtles?"

Jim halfway looked at Charlie as if he would like to speak. But Charlie was staring straight ahead, his face chalk-white. He never looked at Jim. At that I could see Jim redden right through his coat of tan. After making some poor excuse about watering his horse, he walked on down the street.

That night as we rode back to camp, I tried to patch things up again. Charlie wouldn't even talk when I spoke to him of Jim.

Our outfit was camped at Stray Horse. Charlie was shoeing a pony when old Miller rode into camp. Old Miller said he had come from the Dart's, said that he had seen Jim, and Jim was packing a gun. Old Miller figgered Charlie ought to know just what was going on. It was common talk among the Dart cowhands that Jim intended to kill Charlie the first time they met up.

Naturally, we looked at Charlie while Miller was airin' his paunch. Charlie didn't say a word, but his face went white. As soon as he got his pony plated, he rode on out to the herd.

As a usual thing, Charlie never packed a six-shooter. He carried it in his bed. But the morning after old Miller rode into camp, Charlie was wearing his gun.

There was no way to avoid a meeting. It would be settled that day. We were moving our herd south, and from what old Miller told us, the Dart's were coming our way. No matter what had caused it all, it meant but one

thing now. It was that Jim and Charlie, or mebbe both of them, had seen his last sunrise.

We pushed the herd off the bed ground that morning long before daybreak. It must have been two that afternoon when we sighted the dust ahead. The Dart's were coming from the south, so we threwed our herd off to the left so the two herds wouldn't mix.

Charlie helped throw the cattle out. Then he rode up to the boss. If Charlie had been yellow, he wouldn't have made this move. He knew that certain hands were bound to say he was afraid of meeting Jim.

"Jim's comin' yonder," he says. "You know the talk he's made. I've got nothin' against him, so I'm takin' the lower trail." With that he wheeled his horse an' loped away as the Dart leaders came in sight.

The Dart foreman was riding up on point. We spot Skeet Johnson next. We figger Jim is back with the drags. The dust was pretty thick. As soon as their herd come alongside, Skeet rode over to us.

"Where's Charlie?" he says, lookin' around. When we told him about Charlie taking the lower trail, Skeet looked mighty queer. "Jim took the lower trail hisself," he says, "to keep from meeting Charlie!"

The Dart herd finally faded into the dust. We let our cattle graze. I don't know how long we waited. It seemed like an age to me.

"Looks like Jim's got Charlie," the foreman finally says. Two of us were fixing to take the lower trail and look for him, when Charlie rode up to the herd. Right then I hated Charlie. I'd thought a heap of Jim. But all of us gathered around when Charlie began to speak.

"I'm lopin' along the lower trail," he says, "awonderin' if I done right to put the showdown off, athinkin' about this thing, when I see a rider comin'—damned if it ain't Jim! He's lopin' too, until he ketches sight of me. Then he pulls his pony up and we ride toward each other at a walk, watchin' each other like hawks.

"Jim never used to pack a gun. But I see he's got one now. That ain't like Jim. It don't seem right. Then it oc-

curs to me, I'm packin' one myself. But it's him that's made the fightin' talk, so I wait for him to draw.

"A thousand things flit through my head as we ride toward each other. Most of them triffin', too. One of the silver conchos on Jim's bridle has worked loose. I wonder if he knows it. What will he say before he starts to shoot? Mebbe he won't speak! The distance now, I'd say, is twenty yards. Why don't he pull his gun an' start the thing? It's him that's made the talk. I wonder if he still packs the branding iron I made for him when we was camped together. It can't be Jim I see!

"I'm lookin' at a man I've never known. His eyes are hard like flint. His face is like a mask. Now I know it means the end for both of us if he pulls his gun. We ain't ten feet apart—then I hear him speak—

"'Hello, Charlie,' I hear him say in a voice as cold as ice. 'Hello, Jim,' I says to him, still waitin' for him to draw. We were that close our ponies' noses touched. I could have kicked his pony in the belly with my tap as we rode past each other.

"We've passed each other, mebbe fifteen feet, when I take a look around. Kind of a sidelong glance I take to see just what he's doin'. Damned if Jim ain't doin' the same—he's just lookin' around at me.

"I don't know why I did it—things was still pretty tight. But the idea of us two atrying to dodge each other an' meetin' up this way struck me funny all at once. Damned if I didn't laugh.

"At that Jim wheeled his horse around an' flashed that old grin of his. It was the same old Jim I knew. Neither of us says a word, but Jim put out his paw. It ain't till after we shake hands that either of us speak. We don't say much then.

"'I think we're both damn fools,' says Jim.

"Then we shook hands again."

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

By S. Omar Barker

I RECKON Uncle Duff was a sort of a heller all right. Everybody said he was, and I never did hear him deny it. But nobody seemed to know just what they meant by it. He wasn't a drinking man, but he could help unravel a town with just as much whoop and holler as the next one. He was a crack shot with a pistol, yet in a time when most horseback men held it an obligation of honor to settle their differences with lead, Uncle Duff, moderate of size and slender, did his fighting by hand, and according to his own code.

"If it's an honest disagreement," he advised me, "fight it out fair. But if you've been jumped on unreasonable, wrestle him down an' git your thumb in his eye!"

He was a competent cowhand and a middling success in his own brand, but he was liable to waste half a day for a whole roundup crew matching bullfights. If anybody ever needed a leg cut off Uncle Duff would have come a-running and brought his own saw—unless he happened to be too busy painting red stripes on a live horny toad to amaze little Belinda Wheeler with, the next time her ma let me fetch the kids over when I went after mail.

Mostly Uncle Duff and I rode together, but Wheeler's was one place he kept away from.

Even Ma said she would just as soon try to understand the ways of a wolf as she would Duffey Mason's, and she was his own sister. She seemed to think what he needed was a regulator. "Here you are," she would scold, "goin' on thirty-one, sound in wind and limb—why the dickens don't you find you a good, honest girl and get married?"

"Maybe I'd rather go fishin'," Uncle Duff would drawl, throwing me a wink. That always made me grin, because everybody knew the only time Duff Mason had ever gone

fishing in his life was the time he turned up the bellies of a wagonload of mudcats and suckers with a charge of powder in a hole on Bedalong Creek. He hadn't been fish-hungry; just liked to see the splash.

At 34 Ma was a strong-minded woman, else she couldn't have been kin to Uncle Duff. She refused to be sidetracked. "Women was created a-purpose so men could marry," she said severely. "It's the Lord's will, Duff Mason, and you know it!"

"If that's what Gran'pa God was aimin' at," drawled Uncle Duff, "it's a wonder he didn't create more of 'em purty!"

That was another thing that made tongues cluck—this "Gran'pa God" talk that he had learned from the Mexicans the time he trailed a stolen horse all the way to Taos without telling anybody he was going—and didn't get back for two years.

"If you thought Becky McGuire was so tarnation purty," said Ma, thumbing straight for the supposed sore spot, "why in the name of creation didn't you marry her when you had the chance?"

This made Uncle Duff bat his granite-blue eyes a little, but if it sure enough quicked him he never let on.

"Ain't it funny," he chuckled, "how a man forgets things he ain't reminded of over two or three times a week?"

"Shame on you!" With Ma barking on your trail you might as well run for a hollow log. "My own brother! I just can't get over it!"

"Give yourself time, Sweet-Lickin'," grinned Uncle Duff, using the name Ma told me he had made up for her while licking a cake batter crock when he was a five-year-old. "It's only been ten or twelve years!"

"Eight," Ma corrected him with a sigh. "Little Jace Wheeler is goin' on seven. And to think that if you hadn't set more store by watchin' a couple of ol' surlies do battle than by gettin' to your own wedding, such a boy might have been yours!"

"Gran'pa God forbid!" said Uncle Duff. Although he was fond enough of Becky Wheeler's little girl, he made

no bones about considering her son a pest. "If that little egg-sucker was mine, I'd drop him on his head an' shorten his neck a little. Besides, it wasn't bulls I was watchin' fight that time—it was a pair of buck deer that I happened onto on Big Hump Mesa." He turned to me, and there was a gleam of excitement in his eyes just from the remembering of it. "Seven hours them bucks had their antlers locked, Bub, before they give out! If I hadn't been there to untangle 'em, they'd have laid there an' starved to death. A man don't git a chance at a sight like that but once in a lifetime, Bub!"

It must have been a fine, wild thing to see, and I wondered if I would ever have such a chance. At 13 the only thing I didn't admire about Uncle Duff was him calling me Bub. Ma had torn the wagonsheet by naming me Mansfield out of some book she'd read, so of course I needed a nickname. "Buck" would have suited me fine. But Uncle Duff took a notion to call me Bub, and he was a hard man to wean.

In the year since a stumbling bronc had sent Pa off to The High Pasture and Ma and me here to the Wagon Mesa country to live with Uncle Duff, I'd heard Ma wring him out a dozen times about leaving his bride-to-be waiting at the church while he watched a buckfight. Only Ma never could seem to remember whether it was a buckfight or a bullfight. Her mind ran more toward other things.

"Buckfight or bullfight," she continued her chiding, "it doesn't matter a whiff! You can't blame a prideful girl for getting mad and marrying another man!"

"You never heard me blame her, have you?"

"Not out loud. But you won't neighbor with them. You won't—"

"Me an' Jason Wheeler just ain't the same breed of dog," said Uncle Duff curtly.

"I notice you make over that little daughter of his a-plenty whenever she comes over here to play!"

Uncle Duff blew a puff of smoke up past his nose, probably to hide the look that came into his eyes at the men-

tion of five-year-old Belinda Wheeler, dark-eyed 'and sweet as a red velvet-flower.

"That proves what I'm tryin' to tell you," Ma persisted. "You ought to marry and have a little girl of your own instead of havin' to steal the chance to pet somebody else's because you're scared her Pa might take a shot at you!"

That quickened him. Ma sure knew how to stir his dander.

"Scared hell!" he said with a sharp hardness like the cut edge of a piece of rawhide. "I'll play dolls with B'lindy on her own front porch any time I take a notion to—an' who'll stop me?"

"Then why don't you?" Ma inquired sweetly.

"Because I ain't took a notion to—yet," said Uncle Duff.

Uncle Duff had paddled little Jace Wheeler once at our house for rubbing fresh cow sign in Belinda's hair, and the little booger had spread the word that his Pa aimed to make a go-bang business of it if Uncle Duff ever showed up on his premises. Maybe some folks got it in their heads that was why Uncle Duff kept away from there—except for the times I aim to tell about. But to me it was plain that whatever my Uncle Duff took a notion to do, no fear of either God or man ever stopped him.

Right now he took a notion to yank loose Ma's apron strings when she turned to stir a kettle of wild-grape jam. "Don't you fret about me an' Jason Wheeler," he drawled with the perfectly sober face those oldtime cowhands knew so well how to put on when they was joshing. "If trouble busts loose, I can always run for the church!"

"Shame on you!" said Ma. But she had to hide a smile, and I laughed right out loud, because I had been there and seen it happen. There wasn't much of Uncle Duff's hell-arounding that I ever missed.

At that time Wheelerville was just Jason Wheeler's house and store, Frenchy Pinard's blacksmith shop, and the little plank shack with a steeple on it that Wheeler had built for a church—preached in several times a year by some stray circuit rider, used the rest of the time by

Wheeler himself to store grain in. Some said Jason had built the church as bait with which to promote a settlement around his store. But if he had it didn't work.

Uncle Duff claimed that all anybody needed in those days to start a town was a barrel of whisky and a gourd. But he had tried that himself, and it hadn't worked either. He had added another gourd and a little stock of goods to the whisky barrel and set up a store at the foot of Wagon Mesa, aiming "to git rich an' famous." But Uncle Duff was born to the saddle, not a prune counter.

He got into the habit of leaving the store open for folks to help themselves and leave the money in a cigar box while he was out with the cattle. Business might have thrived even on that basis, for it was 90 miles to Gap City and most range folks run pretty strong to honesty. But one day a cowhand named Jake Lang held a match to the bunghole to see how empty the whisky barrel was. Uncle Duff spied the smoke from not very far away, but he had a bullfight going, and by the time he found out which old surly could shove the hardest, his store was a pile of ashes.

The next day two wagonloads of goods unloaded at Jason Wheeler's place over on Bedalong Creek and Jace went into the mercantile business. It may have seemed peculiar to Uncle Duff that Wheeler was so ready to start a store when his own burned down, especially as Jake Lang was a Running W cowhand, but he never made an issue of it. Instead he hunted Jake up and thanked him.

"I'm built too short in the pockets for a damn counter jumper anyhow, Jake," he said. "You done me a favor by burnin' me out. But I ought to thumb Jace Wheeler's eyes out for puttin' you up to it."

"I tell you it was an accident, Duff!" Jake protested. "Wheeler never had no hand in it!"

"Sure," said Uncle Duff. "I hear he's goin' to sell everything from dog-irons to didies in that new store of his."

"He sure is!" Jake was enthusiastic. "Even got ol' Doc Roseberry to pick him out a shelf of medicines to cure everything from skunk bite to the hollow gut."

"Best cure for skunk bite that I know of," observed

Uncle Duff dryly, "is to bite the skunk first."

"You oughta come over an' see what a layout he's got," Jake urged. "Beats haulin' from Cap City all to hell!"

"Maybe I will," said Uncle Duff, tilting his tall-crowned hat over one ear while he scratched above the other. "Any of them new bulls of Wheeler's I might match a fight with for Ol' Champ?"

"The Runnin' W don't buy high-class bulls just to git a horn run through 'em. If I was you I wouldn't mention matchin' a bullfight to Jace Wheeler."

"If you was me," drawled Uncle Duff, "you'd shorten your lip a little before somebody steps on it."

It had been a few days later that Uncle Duff, Brazos Bill, Jug Johnson, and I cut out a little ol' pot-bellied dogie bull and drove him over to Wheeler's. You never saw such a sorry-looking burr-tailed scrub in your life, but salty. The way he had gone on the prod when roped had tempted Uncle Duff to have a little fun.

Uncle Duff and Brazos Bill V'd their ropes on this little bull while Jug Johnson and I choused him from behind. He was plenty frothy by the time we stopped between Wheeler's store and the little plank church. There he sulled. Uncle Duff let out a whoop, and Jason Wheeler came stomping out of the store, followed by Jake Lang and several others. Jason was a tall, red-necked man, broad of hip and shoulder, with bristly red eyebrows.

"Howdy, Mr. Wheeler," drawled Uncle Duff in that dead sober way of his. "I hear you're in the market for hundred-dollar bulls. Now here's a high-class purebred Scandinoovian swayback, that I'll sell you for ninety-nine an' a case of prunes!"

"This scrub?" That Jason Wheeler was a humorless man was betrayed in the tone of his scorn, and the cowboys all began to grin. "Do you think I'm crazy?"

"If I did, do you think I'd come over here an' offer you this fine young male at half what he's worth?"

"Worth? Why, I wouldn't give a dime for him! Get him out of here!"

"I hear you're a good judge of cattle, Mr. Wheeler,"

urged Uncle Duff soothingly. "Prob'ly the best in the Territory. Before you miss this bargain, kindly step down an' feel the taller on this bull's brisket!"

The brisket was plainly pure hide and hair and cockleburrs, and the cowboys' grins widened.

Wheeler stepped down off the store porch. "Hup!" he growled, making a shooing motion with his hat. "Huy-yah! Get this scrub off'n my premises!"

He ought to have been around cattle and cowboys long enough to know better. The scrub bull's tail gave a single switch, then arched a little up close to the root. His ears stood forward. He pawed at the earth, took a couple of short, stiff-legged steps, snuffed wind from his nose, and charged.

Uncle Duff's and Brazos Bill's ropes had looked fairly secure to the saddle horns, but now they suddenly slipped their dallies and fell slack. As Mr. Wheeler side-stepped, one of the scrub's stubby horns raked his hip pocket. By the time the little bull could whirl to charge again, the red-necked storekeeper was racing toward the open door of the little plank church, and it seemed to me that I could smell laughter in the whoops with which all of them, even Jake Lang, helped him run.

Whether the bull would have followed him on into the church without a little judicious guiding, no one will ever know. Looking in through the window I saw Mr. Wheeler treed on a pile of grain sacks and the bull having it out with a pair of plank benches and a tangled rope.

"Jake!" Wheeler yelled. "Fetch me my gun and I'll shoot the son of a so-and-so!"

It never was right clear whether he meant the bull or Uncle Duff, who was now standing in the doorway, rolling a smoke and giving no sign of amusement beyond a twinkle in his eye.

He turned to Lang. "Jake," he said, "hadn't you better fetch the man his go-bang?"

It was Becky Wheeler, still slender as a young girl, her long brown hair loose in the wind, who came running out of the house then and put a stop to the show. "Never

mind the gun, Jakel" she said sharply, then bowed right up to Uncle Duff, her brown eyes flashing. "This is a fine thing, Duff Mason! Aren't you ever going to grow up?"

The look Uncle Duff gave her had something in it, I don't know what. "What for, Becky?" he said, and this time the soberness didn't look to be put on. He turned to the rest of us. "All right, boys, let's git this calf outa here before he busts a horn!"

The five of us worked him out without too much trouble, even with little Jace Wheeler in the way. Pretty soon we had the tow ropes fresh rigged on him, ready to go.

Nobody looked very mad now except Wheeler, and I thought Becky's presence had him tapered off a little, too. He waved a big hand toward the meeting-house, which was some messed up inside. "Who's goin' to pay this damage, Mason?"

Uncle Duff took time to lean down and give little Belinda Wheeler a willowbark whistle he fetched out of his pocket, then shrugged. "Why, if the bull won't, I reckon I will. How much?"

"Never mind it!" said Becky Wheeler quickly. "Only—please, Duff—I wish you wouldn't come here stirring up trouble!"

Without answering, Uncle Duff forked a couple of sawbucks out of his wallet and handed them to me. "Pay the man, Bub," he said. "An' look out you don't git bit."

I will say for Jason Wheeler that one of the tens was all he would take.

As we rode away, Brazos Bill had just started to rehash the bull sale for a warmed-over laugh, when a whizzer of a rock caught Uncle Duff behind the ear and like to knocked him out of the saddle. When we turned to look, we saw little Jace Wheeler cutting the dust for the house with his Ma right after him.

"Gran'pa God!" said Uncle Duff, rubbing the bump, "I never knowed a mule could kick that high!"

That was the ruckus Uncle Duff had referred to when he told Ma that he "could always run for the church."

It took a pretty good range bull to bring \$50 in those

days, so when Jason Wheeler shipped in a \$500 white-face from Missouri, it gave folks almost as much to talk about as the epidemic of throat disease that came to plague the country only a few weeks later. It was a different kind of talk, of course, because Wheeler's bull didn't kill anybody's kids, but the diphtheria did.

I don't know whether Wheeler put the new bull in his west boundary pasture on purpose to tantalize Uncle Duff or not. But Uncle Duff he couldn't wait to go take a look at him. Brazos Bill and I rode with him down along our side of the stout four-wire fence between the two properties one evening, but the new bull was off in the scrubbery somewhere and we didn't sight him.

Uncle Duff never said anything, but the next morning he was gone before I got up, and toward noon Ma and I heard the doggonedest belling you ever listened to, off down the draw.

"It's Ol' Champ an' Wheeler's new bull talkin' fight!" I said.

"But I thought you told me Champ ranged over on Plum Creek!" said Ma, biting her lip.

"Oh, well," I told her, "bulls always drift around right smart."

That didn't fool Ma any. She knew as well as I did how come Champ to turn up all of a sudden over here next to the Running W fence. "I hope Duff don't cut Jason Wheeler's wire just to see two ol' surlies fight," she said uneasily.

"Uncle Duff never cut another man's fence in his life," I said. But I couldn't help wondering just how stout that four-wire fence of Wheeler's was. I rigged my pony and rode down there as quick as I could.

Ol' Champ was a high-hipped, dun-yellow bull about seven years old that had whipped every bull on Uncle Duff's range. In the longhorn breed, bulls never did grow great long horns like the steers did. Champ's were as thick as a man's leg at the butt, with an upswing that in about 15 inches tapered into polished black points as hard as flint and sharp as a bodkin. I doubt if he would have

weighed 1000 pounds, but as Uncle Duff said, it was "all gristle an' go-git-'em."

Down on the first flat I came onto Uncle Duff sitting on his horse with one leg crooked around the saddle horn watching excited cattle putting on a parade up and down opposite sides of the fence. Strange cattle always act snuffy when they first come together and when a couple of bulls pair off and begin bowing up to each other, it reminds you of the way a crowd of humans flock to a fist fight. That's the way it was there on the flat.

Wheeler's deep-loined new Hereford bull was mighty pretty. His red was the reddest I'd ever seen on a cow animal and the white of his head the whitest. His horns looked a little shorter than Ol' Champ's, and whitish at the tip, but plenty stout and sharp. With his thick, curly neck all bowed up, his nostrils blowing the dust, he was crowding the fence just about as close as Ol' Champ was. It surprised me to see a cowpen bull showing just as much fight as a longhorn of the range.

Either one of them was stout enough to have ripped that fence down, but you could see that neither was going to risk being caught off base long enough to do it. Bulls don't open a battle by trying to hook each other. They circle for position, then crash their heads together head-on and push.

Uncle Duff didn't say anything when I rode up. I hooked my leg over the saddle horn, the same as his.

"Ol' White-Face looks mighty heavy," I commented.

Just then the Hereford ran his tongue out about a foot and let out a short, rusty blat. Ol' Champ just stood there solid, snuffing wind through his nose but never batting an eye.

"I'll bet Ol' Champ can whip him," said Uncle Duff, with a calculating quirk of his head. "I'd sure give a purty to see him try!"

"You reckon that fence will keep 'em apart, Uncle Duff?" I inquired hopefully.

"It's a purty stout fence," said Uncle Duff. He stepped off his horse and picked up a stout-looking stick. He stuck

it behind the top wire like a lever and put on a little pressure. "Staple seems plenty tight," he said—and at that moment Jason Wheeler and Jake Lang rode up out of a gully a few yards away. Uncle Duff didn't move away from the fence.

"Mason," said Wheeler, lofty as all get-out, "I paid five hundred dollars for that bull. If you turn that scrub long-horn of yours in on him and get him hurt there'll be trouble."

"When there is," said Uncle Duff, "I'll be there."

"I'm just warnin' you," said Wheeler.

"Mr. Wheeler," said Uncle Duff, shucking his coat, "which side of this fence would you rather fight on?"

Wheeler's answer to that was to give a single significant slap at the butt of his gun and ride away. Jake Lang sort of grinned and followed him.

I never did see anything eat on a man more than the idea of matching a fight between those two bulls did on Uncle Duff. Sometime almost every day White-Face and Ol' Champ would rendezvous at the fence line for a spell of "paw and beller," and Uncle Duff didn't often miss being on hand to watch them.

But when Ma tartly suggested that somebody might saw off a few posts so the fence could accidentally fall down, and get all this foolishness over with, Uncle Duff spoke up pretty sharp.

"That white-face is valuable property," he said, and it sounded to me as if he was mainly laying it on the tawline to himself. "Gittin' him hurt would be might' nigh the same as stealin'!"

It wasn't very long afterward that we heard that a sickness which Doc Roseberry called diphtheria had broken out in Gap City. Next it was spreading out among the nesters. We heard that two Ramadeaux children over on French Creek had died with it, quick. It gave us something more vital to talk about than Jason Wheeler's new bull. We heard that Doc Roseberry had a medicine called antitoxin which needed only a single dose to cure the disease if he got to it in time. But it was a medicine that

had to be shot into you with a needle, and with people living so far apart, old Doc Roseberry was having a hell of a time trying to answer every call.

Then the word got around that Jason Wheeler had bought a batch of the stuff to sell at his store, and the nester-folks were buying it and shooting it into their ailing children themselves whether they knew how or not—even whether they knew for sure that it was the diphtheria. To make it easier for country doctors, or for folks who weren't doctors, to use, the antitoxin was put up in single doses, each supposed to be enough for one case, not measured out in units according to need as it is now. But there were cases where the child died anyway, and some parents feared the medicine almost as much as they did the disease.

Uncle Duff got the notion that maybe folks weren't using it right, and rode all the way to Gap City to get Doc Roseberry to show him "the right way to squirt them hooperdamics." After that he rode far and often, but came home often, too, always with anxiety in his eyes.

"Any news?" he would ask, and Ma would shake her head, meaning that neither her young 'un or the Wheelers had come down with it yet.

Even with all his going and coming, Uncle Duff still found time once in a while to take a *pasear* down the fence and speculate on the forbidden pleasure of matching that bullfight. That's what he and I were doing the morning that Frenchy Pinard, his rheumatic legs comfortless in the saddle, came riding over.

"Those Wheeler keeds," he said, "they go seeck in the night. All cowboys out on the works—the Papa ride for the Docteur heself. But Meez Wheeler afraid they die before he return back. She like you to come—queeck!"

That was how we went—quick. Uncle Duff ordered me back to the house, but I didn't mind him. After that I don't think he noticed whether I came along or not.

Becky Wheeler's face was as gray-white as wet paper when she came to the door. "Duff," she said, "we're in a fix. Jason sold out all the antitoxin. He couldn't refuse

folks, and he expected to get more. This morning I looked again—and found one dose, back of the shelf.”

“Well, one dose is better than none,” said Uncle Duff.

“But—but don’t you see, Duff? It’s enough for *one* of the children—but not for both! They choke so bad, and their fever’s so high! Duff—I’m scared!”

Uncle Duff put the needle in a saucepan and poured boiling water from the teakettle over it. “Becky,” he said quietly. “I reckon you’ll have to tell me which one to save—an’ which to risk.”

“I can’t! Oh, God, I can’t!” Becky’s voice had a faraway, whispery sound to it. “Duff—I want you to go in there—alone—and do what God tells you is right. And whether they live or die, promise me never to tell me—or anybody—which one you gave it to!”

Duff looked at her a long time without batting those granite-blue eyes of his. “I’m afraid me an’ Gran’pa God ain’t on close enough speakin’ terms for that,” he said finally. “But I reckon I’ll promise you.”

I didn’t suppose he even knew I was there, but as he went into the bedroom, he turned in the door. “You git back outside, Bub,” he ordered sharply. “Don’t you know this damn stuff is ketchin’?”

I went outside quickly and slipped around to the bedroom window. Uncle Duff must have found the room too hot for his liking, for I had to duck down below the sill when he came over and opened the long-faced lower sash a few inches.

When I peeked again he was still standing there, his head turned sidewise and a little up, like he was talking to somebody taller than he was.

“Look here, Gran’pa God,” he was saying, as if speaking to a friendly neighbor, “if this was a bullfight I’d know what to do. But the way it is, it looks like you’ve got me between a rock an’ a hard place.”

Then he went over to the corner where the bed was, and I never could crane my neck enough to see which one of the sick kids he shot the medicine into. Ornerly as he was, I couldn’t help feeling sorry for little Jace.

Uncle Duff was a long time coming out. I was waiting on the front porch when Becky came to the door with him.

"I've done all I can do," I heard him tell her. "The rest is up to Gran'pa God. But I'll stay till Jason gits back with the doctor if you want me to."

"You look all wore out yourself, Duff," she said. "Jake and the cowboys will be in off the work, and Mrs. Pinard's coming to stay with me. Whyn't you go on home and get some rest?"

I'd seen Uncle Duff in many a mood, but never tight-strung and drawn around the gills like he was as we rode back toward the ranch. Once my pony stumbled and bumped into his a little.

"Gran'pa God!" he said, sharper than he had ever spoken to me before. "Can't you hold that damn nag's head up?"

As we rode up the boundary fence, there were those two bulls up along the wire again, talking fight. At first I thought Uncle Duff was going to ride right on past without even looking at them. Then all of a sudden he reined up.

"Bub," he said, "let's you an' me match us a bullfight!"

The sound of it somehow put me in mind of the way I've since seen men with a bad case of the drooptail reach for a bottle of whiskey.

With a couple of stout sticks and a rock it didn't take us long to loosen staples and let down the wire. To my surprise it was White-Face that made the invasion, bowed up and snuffing to beat the band, while Ol' Champ took time out to paw some more dirt up on his narrow back.

By the time we got back on our horses, they were stiff-tailed and circling for position. Then their big bony foreheads crashed together and their backs began to hump up with the strain of a mighty pushing that budged neither one of them a foot. A couple of frolicking steers bowed up and blatted and pranced around them, but the battling bulls paid them no attention.

"Purty well matched!" said Uncle Duff, and something

of the old gleam was back in his eye.

Then the Hereford's superior weight began to tell, and Ol' Champ began to give ground.

"He's goin' to git licked, Uncle Duff!" I cried, with very real concern. "That White-Face has got him goin'!"

"Ol' Champ's been pushed before," said Uncle Duff.

In another moment I saw what he meant. Instead of losing footing and letting himself get hooked down when he had to back up too fast, the wiry longhorn broke free, sprang sideways with incredible nimbleness and whirled to horn the white-face in the shoulder as he surged past. It was a vicious gouge, but it did not down the Hereford. With a grunt he arched around with his meaty neck bowed and again the head-on battle of the push began.

Time after time in the next hour White-Face seemed to gain an overpowering advantage, only to have Ol' Champ's spry footwork beat him out of it. Then finally one of Ol' Champ's horn thrusts found a soft spot between two ribs, and the white-face went down, never to get up again.

"I love to see 'em fight, but I hate to see 'em git horned down an' killed," was Uncle Duff's comment as we rode on home. "That white-face put up right smart of a battle!"

It had been an exciting but not a pretty thing to see. I felt shaky and sort of sick inside. I was scared, too, wondering what Wheeler would do when he found out what had happened to his bull.

At the ranch Uncle Duff stopped only to swallow a cup of coffee, then allowed he would take a *pasear* over to French Creek to see how the sick folks over there were making out, and Ma didn't try to stop him. He seemed in mighty good spirits.

"There's a young widow woman over there," Ma said sort of to herself after he left. "Who knows?"

It was some after sunup when he got back the next morning.

"Saddle me a fresh horse while I see if I can beg your Ma out of a cup of coffee, Bub," he said. "I'm goin' to ride over an' see if Wheeler's back with the doctor yet."

You recollect he said there'd be trouble if anything happened to his bull—an' I promised him I'd be there."

I didn't ask whether I could go along or not. When I climbed my horse Uncle Duff looked at me mighty hard but didn't say anything, so I went.

Jason Wheeler and old Doc Roseberry came out on the porch as we rode up. Both of them looked pretty gaunt in the face.

"Duff," said Wheeler, "I don't know as it matters a damn now, but I can't help wantin' to know which one—"

"Which won?" broke in Uncle Duff. "Why, that long-horn whipped him four ways from the jack! Your white-face put up a purty fair fight for a cowpen critter, but—"

"I ain't talkin' about bulls, Duff," cut in Wheeler. "I want to know which one of my children you give that medicine to?"

"Gran'pa God!" said Uncle Duff, sort of quiet. "You mean one of 'em died?"

"The kids," said Doc Roseberry, squinting through his pipe smoke, "are both doin' all right. My godfrey, what you fixin' to do with all that money, Duff? My fees ain't that high!"

Uncle Duff had dismounted and was stiff-legging it up the porch steps with a thick wad of bills which he shoved into Jason Wheeler's hands. "Payin' for a bullfight, Doc," he breezed. "An' by the Gran'pa it was worth it!" He turned to bat his granite-blue eyes challengingly at Mr. Wheeler. "I'm buyin' me a dead bull, Wheeler," he said. "If five hundred ain't enough, come over an' see if you're man enough to pull my whiskers for the balance! So long, gents!"

Jason Wheeler stared at the money in his hand, then at Uncle Duff's back as he reached for his horse. "Hold on here! I don't ask no money from you, Duff!" he began. "I—"

But that didn't stop Uncle Duff. Becky Wheeler came out the door, just as he swung into the saddle, her lips parted as if to call to him; but that didn't stop him either. And whatever Uncle Duff was a-notion to do was good

enough for me. We left out of there in a fog of dust.

"Sure 'nough, Uncle Duff," I asked him as we loped away, "which one *did* you give the medicine to?"

"That, Bub," he grinned back at me, "is between me an' Gran'pa God!"

And so it might have remained if old Doc Roseberry hadn't later told Ma in confidence that he had noticed hypodermic-needle pricks in the skin of both little Belinda and Jace. Half a dose of antitoxin each, he figured, had somehow been enough to stave off the strangling till he got there.

Maybe Gran'pa God had something to do with that, too.



The Haunted Ranch

By J. E. Grinstead

A SUCKER with money can always find somebody to take it," quoth Judge Alamarine Wotterson sagely.

Judge Wotterson was a big man, and fat besides. He habitually wore a Prince Albert that never had been—and couldn't be—buttoned at the waist. He had stubbly whiskers, on a moon-shaped face, shaggy eyebrows, and a judicial air. Otherwise, he was just a mountain of meat.

The judge's office was on the main, and only, street of San Gregario. This historic hamlet was in the Rio Grande Valley, in a part of Texas that was not, and never had been, much frequented. The office was a squatty, one-story 'dobe shack. The front room was office, and the back room was sleeping quarters. Meals were picked up precariously. Creaking on an iron rod over the jurist's head was a tin sign that bore the legend, *Al. Wotterson, Lawyer, Real Estate and Land Titles*. Judge Wotterson was feeling wise and independent this morning. A sucker had come along with money, and his share of it, \$250, now reposed in the inside pocket of his flaring Prince Albert.

It was one of those early April mornings when the whole world wakes up without any pep. The sun, even, had risen in a laggard manner, as if uncertain whether it could make the usual day's journey to the west. Out of a camp yard a little way down the street, a chuck wagon, driven by a Mexican camp cook, debouched into the dusty thoroughfare. It was followed by a *remuda* of 25 or 30 cow ponies, each with a hobble on its neck for convenience when night should come—in the event the sun could make the trip to the west. Riding behind the ponies were three Mexican *vaqueros*, one of whom was well known to Judge Wotterson. His name was Pablo Villereal. He spoke good English, played a fair game of poker, and had

an innocent, ingratiating air—which didn't mislead the judge very much. Riding a little back of and aloof from the outfit was one lone white man. He appeared to be about 30. Women would have called him handsome, and a fair-minded man would not have disputed it. He sat his horse as if he were part of it, carried a long Winchester rifle in a saddle scabbard and a pistol in a holster at his belt. He wore no *chaparejos*. The tight legs of his boots came almost to his knees, and there was something wrong about the position of his feet in the stirrups. He was letting the three *vaqueros* haze the ponies along while he followed with a thoughtful expression on his handsome face.

Judge Wotterson watched the progress of the outfit, seeing that, in spite of the many hoofs, the dust didn't rise more than two feet. Even the dust in the streets of San Gregario was tired that morning. When the wagon, horses, and Mexicans had passed, the white man came by and waved a hand in greeting. The judge made a languid motion with one hamlike fist and collapsed into his chair.

"Wonder what the hell's the matter with that ranch?" he muttered to himself. "This is the third time I've sold it in three years. First time for two dollars an acre, next time for a dollar, and this time for fo' bits an acre. Ten thousand acres, with a four-wire fence around it, for five thousand dollars. That wouldn't build the fence. Dang' place must be haunted."

The judge took a liberal chew from a thin plug of tobacco. "Sam Merrill," he went on. "No Cap'n, no Col., no Mr. Not S. H., Sam H., Samuel H., but just plain Sam Merrill. He don't belong in the picture, but he seems to know his way about. Don't talk much, pays cash on the nail, and seems right smart, but I'll bet fo' bits he ain't got as much cow sense as a Norman hawss!"

Judge Wotterson got up, moved with a rolling gait through the door, which would barely admit him, and disappeared into his office. The cow outfit turned north at the end of the street and eventually reached a herd of cattle that was grazing in the valley. There were a thousand of them, and they were obviously the tailings of all

the herds in the world, but Sam Merrill had bought them the day before and paid cash for them. Now he took possession of his property and drove the herd on north.

The 10,000-acre ranch that Merrill had bought lay 100 miles north of San Gregario. He had never seen it. He had bought it on the assumption that the land was bound to be worth more than 50 cents an acre, even if Judge Woterson had lied about the good three-room house, one well and windmill at the ranch house, and plenty of fine running water back in the draws the year round for stock. The ranch lay well up toward the Llano Estacado, in a range of hills that had been formed by erosion, where the great tableland broke into the Rio Grande watershed. The Mexicans called these hills *Sierros Gatos Silvestre*. Americans called them Wildcat Mountains.

On the 100-mile drive not a house was seen and not a man was met. Merrill had been told that there was a shorter trail, but that it was rough country and poor going for a herd. There was but one thing that broke the monotony of the trip for the three Mexicans, and that was the peculiar behavior of their employer. He could ride anything he could get his saddle on, but he couldn't rope a gentle pony even when it was standing still. One day a coyote trotted out of the brush at a distance of 60 yards. Merrill's six-shooter flipped from the holster, cracked, and the wolf tumbled over with a broken neck. That same day as they ate supper, just before sunset, an eagle perched on a dead tree fully 300 yards from camp. Merrill picked up his rifle, raised the sight, and fired one shot. The eagle fell without a flutter.

"*Caramba!*" cried one of the *vaqueros*. "*Muy buen tirador!*"

Pablo Villereal munched his food in silence. He had already made up his mind, when he saw the coyote killed that, if he ever had a gun argument with Merrill, he'd shoot first—or not at all!

Upon reaching the new ranch Merrill found it to be better than it had been described to him. The house of three rooms was substantially built with thick 'dobe walls

and a broad gallery. In one room was a deep fireplace. At a little distance from the house was a comfortable shack for the men. The well was there, and the windmill and tank were in good repair. Out of the wagon came a bed, a comfortable chair, a bookshelf, and a number of books. They were books that Sam Merrill always wanted to read. Obviously, his social duties would be light. He hadn't seen a house since he left San Gregario.

For a few days Merrill rode with his men, watching the herd split into little groups and locate at different watering places. Pablo rode the fence around the entire 10,000 acres and reported it to be in good condition. Pretty soon the novelty wore off and Merrill quit riding with his men. Why should he? Pablo was his foreman and seemed to know his business. So Merrill divided his time between hunting cats in the mountains and reading in his comfortable room. He had selected a small Roman "M" for his brand, and his men had put it on the hip of each animal. This was merely a precautionary measure in the event that one of them should get through the fence.

If, as Judge Wotterson insinuated, the ranch was haunted, there was no indication of it. No gurgling screams in the night time, no rattling of chains, strange lights, or uncanny slamming of doors, after the orthodox fashion of haunted places. The range was good; rains came at intervals, and with fine grass and abundance of water, the scrawny herd was developing nicely.

A year passed. Merrill hadn't been away from the ranch. Twice he had sent a Mexican down to San Gregario with the wagon for supplies. He had left a deposit at the store there, and the supplies came up all right. The truth of the matter was that Sam Merrill was simply waiting patiently for those thousand cattle to produce beef, as if he had set a hen and was waiting for the eggs to hatch. His line of reasoning, if any, was that he had bought cheap land and that meant cheap grass. He paid his men low wages and there was no chance for anything but success. Winter came on and Merrill settled to his books, with an occasional hunt to break the monotony.

He had gotten his ideas of the cow business somewhere—perhaps from reading Mother Goose—and was apparently quite satisfied with them.

At any rate, Merrill knew that there had to be a spring roundup. So, when he had been there almost a year and the grass was coming again, he told Pablo he wanted to round up his cattle and look them over. Pablo put him off for a day or two, but finally the work began. After a week of riding, in which Merrill joined eagerly, they found 70 cattle, hidden away in deep draws and out-of-the-way places. Then Sam Merrill asked his foreman how come?

And Pablo talked bad Spanish volubly, with mouth, hands, and eyes. A good stiff American oath brought the understanding to Pablo that Merrill wasn't getting him by a mile, and he changed tongues. He didn't know. The whole thing was an astounding mystery to him. Perhaps the wildcats had gotten the cattle. Perhaps, also, the place was haunted. Pablo had shewdly judged that Merrill didn't know a thing on earth about the cow business nor about the country in which he was trying to ranch, so he turned himself loose and improvised an appealing chain of ways in which the cattle might have disappeared. He was quaking in his boots every minute, for he expected Merrill to break loose and start something, and he hadn't forgotten what his employer could do with a gun. To his surprise and great relief, Merrill didn't get mad. Didn't blame him for not keeping a closer watch on the cattle. Didn't question his veracity when he said he had seen all the cattle within a week, which was very close to the truth.

Sam Merrill was a tenderfoot and a fool according to the standards of that frontier cow country, but he at least had sense enough to know when he was beaten, no matter what the game was. He had killed a good many Mexican lions, panthers, wolves, and the like, since he had been there, but he hadn't supposed they would retaliate by eating nearly 1000 cattle in one year—and not leaving any bones! As to the ranch being haunted by some mystery, he had little faith in that theory. Anyway, his cattle were gone. Pablo had sworn that the fence was in per-

fect condition, and he had, himself, looked at most of it. Pablo insisted that if there was no fence there the cattle wouldn't leave the range.

There was but one thing for him to do. There was no use staying there with a force of men to look after 70 cattle. He didn't have money to buy another herd. If he had, they would doubtless disappear in the same manner. So he let his men go, and the following morning he closed the doors of the house, mounted his horse, and took the short trail down the mountain toward San Gregario, riding alone.

The fact was that Sam Merrill had come to the cow country in a pique. He'd show some people what there was to him. He'd go to the frontier, buy cheap land, raise cattle, and get rich. Then he'd go back and flaunt his money in their faces. Now, as he rode down the winding trail, he was going over a good many things in his mind, besides the possibility that the *gatos silvestre* had eaten his cattle. Anyway, this was the longest he had ever stayed in one place. He had been an adventurer and a drifter. He still had the land, so he had lost only the cattle. The money had come too easily in the first place. He could get enough for the land to take him on to another field of adventure. He had enough yet on deposit with his banker-merchant to keep him up until the ranch could be sold. By riding steadily he could reach San Gregario in two days.

Toward noon, when he was about 25 miles from the ranch, the trail made a bend around the base of a hill, and there in a little valley stood a 'dobe house with a broad gallery in front. A gray-haired giant of a man was sitting on the gallery. So there were other houses in this wild country, after all. He'd stop and have a word with this fellow.

Old Emory Clayton, generally known in the range country as Old Man Em, was sitting in a rawhide-bottomed chair, cursing his rheumatism, which had been so bad for several days that he couldn't ride the range with his men.

"Merrill's my name," said Sam politely as he reached the top of the steps.

"Clayton's mine," replied the old ranchman gruffly, and extended his hand. "Take a seat."

"How long have you been ranching in this country, Mr. Clayton?"

"Twenty-five year."

"Have wildcats bothered your herd much?"

"What! Wildcats? Not that I know of. I reck'n they catch a calf once in a while, but—"

"The reason I asked, I took a thousand cattle out to my ranch a year ago. When we rounded up this spring, I had only seventy left. My foreman said probably the wildcats got them."

Sam was sure he heard a suppressed giggle inside the house, but it was drowned out by the rumble of Old Man Em's voice.

"Wildcats, hell!" he said. "Are you the young fellow that bought the old Pendleton ranch last year?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ever been in the cow business before?"

"No, sir."

"What have you been doing?"

"Why, not much of anything. I've hunted big game a good deal, and things like that, but—"

"I see," and Old Man Em looked his visitor up and down. He didn't look, by any means, like a stark idiot, and yet—"You been stole out. Didn't you know it?"

"Why—why, I don't see how that could be. My foreman would have known, and he—"

"Yes. I reck'n he would, and did, know," commented Old Man Em dryly. "Who was yo' foreman?"

"Pablo Villereal, a Mexican."

"I see. Mexicans are like Americans, and all other people: some are honest and some are not. Pablo is a thief and always has been."

"But—but that would be against the law. If that's what became of my cattle, I'll go to court and have Pablo arrested."

"Law, hell! They ain't no law in this country, except what you got there on yo' hip, and the nerve to use it. Find yo' cattle and take 'em, that's all. You don't aim to let a lot of rustlers run you off from what's rightly yo'n, do you?"

Sam never had thought to ask himself that question. He had heard that suppressed giggle in the house two or three times and it nettled him. One of the things he hated most in the world was a giggling woman. Something told him that this woman was giggling at him and he flushed hotly.

"Why, no," he said slowly. "I've never been very bad about running. I just didn't see any use staying up there any longer, now that my cattle are gone."

"Why, yo' cattle ain't gone. Up the range about twenty mile is what's called the Box J ranch. It's a den of thieves. You're the third man that's tried the old Pendleton place, got stole out, and left. I been hopin' you had the sand to stick and help clean that outfit up."

No big-game hunter lacks sand or likes to be accused of lacking it. That implied charge, together with the repeated giggle, raised the hackles on Sam Merrill's neck, so to speak.

At this juncture a leathery-looking man of middle age, hard of eye and bowed of leg, dismounted at the gate and came trundling his spurs up the trail to the house.

"What is it, Dave?" asked Old Man Em.

"We drive the Little Lometa arroyo this mawnin'."

"Well, what did you find?"

"Near as I can make out, they's about three hundred beef steers gone."

"Gone! Didn't you find no sign?"

"Yes, they's sign a-plenty that the arroyo had been worked recent, and a tar-ble plain trail where a bunch of stuff had crossed the ridge to'ds the Box J."

Sam heard that giggle again, but this time it was obviously at Old Man Em's expense. It was just a throaty gurgle and was drowned in Old Man Em's roar.

"Rope out my braunk, Davel" he thundered.

"Now, Em, you know you are not able to ride, with yo' rheumatism bad like it is," came a gentle voice from inside the house.

"No, I don't reck'n I'm able to ride," replied Old Man Em, "but I'm going to ride, pronto. A little coffee and a bite to eat before we start wouldn't hurt none."

Sam Merrill opened his eyes a bit. So that was the way the cow business was run on the Texas frontier! When an emergency rose, like wildcats or thieves or something driving a man's cattle off, he went after them, even if he had to throw away his crutches to do it.

Ten minutes later, a neat, silver-haired old lady came to the door and invited them in to the noon meal. As they passed into the house, Sam was wondering if she could have been guilty of that giggle. Old Man Em had introduced her as his wife. It was hardly likely that a woman could have lived a good part of her life with that grizzled old giant and still retain a girlish giggle.

When they entered the dining-room, a slender, sober-eyed young woman of 20 stood waiting by the table.

"My daughter, Mr. Merrill," growled Old Man Em.

It was, of course, possible that Nellie Clayton was the giggler, though she didn't look like one. At any rate she was far too pretty and too sensible-looking to be shot for giggling. So Sam ate his dinner in silence. He was 30 years old and unmarried. He had never thought he wanted to marry, but once, and then he didn't. That had had something to do with his adventure into the frontier cattle business.

"I hate to rush off and leave you, Mr. Merrill, but I got to get on the trail of them cattle," Old Man Em said after dinner as they stepped out onto the gallery. "Better turn yo' braunk in the trap and stay all night."

"Thank you, but if you don't mind I'd like to throw in with you on this cattle hunt. I might find some of mine."

Again that throaty giggle came from within the house.

"Got any idea what this little *pasear* is goin' to be like?" asked Clayton.

"No, sir, but—"

"Well, they's apt to be worse'n bobcats. They's apt to be tigers."

"I've killed tigers," said Sam calmly.

"Huh! Them tigers of yo'n wasn't packin' Winchesters and six-shooters, was they?"

"No, sir, but they had claws."

This time the derisive giggle was prolonged almost to the point of choking, and ended with the two words, "*muy loco*," which Sam Merrill heard quite plainly. That roused Sam's ire. Evidently, the girl didn't think he spoke Spanish, and he didn't, but he knew that "loco" meant crazy, or worse yet, a fool. He understood that Old Man Em was going on a trouble hunt. His feet might have gotten cold, but he grated his teeth and said, mentally, to that giggler, *You think it's a joke, but I'll show you.*

"All right," said Clayton. "Let's go!"

At the Little Lometa draw they joined the cow outfit. There were ten men in the gang, including the cook. Two of them had just come in. They reported that the Box J outfit was holding a big herd ten miles away, across the draws.

"All right, we'll cut that herd and see what we find," snapped Old Man Em, wincing as he moved his rheumatic leg. "Let's ride from here."

Leaving the cook to take care of camp, there were just an even dozen men who rode away to cut the Box J herd. That is, if Sam Merrill was counted. Old Man Em didn't count him. He rather liked the young fellow, but he couldn't conceive a human being who was as ignorant of the frontier cow business as Sam was. He long had wished for a real he-man on the old Pendleton ranch to help him hold the Box J level. He mused over this as he went along. Perhaps Merrill would get a lesson on this trip that would take him back to his ranch. All he seemed to need was a little hair in his teeth, and if Dick Sabin, the head of the Box J, had any E C Bar cows in his herd, there was likely to be hair a-plenty.

They rode on steadily, taking a roundabout way that would throw them between the herd and the Box J ranch.

Old Emory Clayton went about the matter as coolly as if it were a move in a game of chess. At last they stopped in a patch of thick woods and took a look about them. On a considerable strip of prairie that ran down into the chaparral country like a broad tongue was a herd of more than 2,000 cattle. On the side of the herd toward the Box J was the camp, chuck wagon, cook, and all the paraphernalia of a cow outfit. It was almost sunset, and all the men were in camp, except the few that were riding herd. There were fully twice as many Box-J men as Clayton had with him. Sam Merrill was thinking of that as he sat peering out through the brush. The thought occurred to him that sometime, somewhere, he had heard the expression: *Yes, but justice is on our side—let's go get 'em*, or words to that effect.

"We can't cut that herd if they don't want us to," growled Old Man Em to the little knot of men around him. "They got too many men. If they want us to cut it, we don't want to cut it."

"Yes, but—" began Sam Merrill, and stopped.

"But what?"

"Nothing. I just hate to quit, now."

"Quit, hell! Who said anything about quitting?" and Clayton gave this fool tenderfoot an odd glance. "I said we couldn't cut the herd if they didn't want us to, and we can't. I never heard of Dick Sabin wanting his herd cut yet, and I don't reck'n he's j'ined the church lately."

The fact of the matter was Old Em Clayton was fixing to run a cold bluff on the Box J outfit. He was in the habit of doing just that. He was a power in the range country, straight as a string, and if anybody wanted to call his bluff any time he'd back it up, but he knew too much about the smell of powder smoke to like it. He had no idea that he was going into a gun fight. In fact, if Sam Merrill hadn't been in his party, he'd have gotten his way without a fight.

Merrill knew that cutting a herd meant going through and driving out cattle that didn't belong there. What he didn't know was that, if the owner of the herd was crooked

and had stolen cattle, he'd bluff if he could and fight at the showdown before he'd have his herd cut. Neither did he know that many of the fiercest battles in the history of the American cattle ranges had been fought over cutting herds.

"All right, fellows, we're going visiting," said Old Man Em. "You better stick along with me, Merrill."

So it happened that when they rode up to the cow camp a few minutes later Sam Merrill stopped right by the side of Old Man Em. He got a good look at the camp before anything started, and among other things he saw Pablo Villereal, his erstwhile foreman, and his two old *vaqueros*.

"Hi, Clayton," called Sabin, an undersized, bowlegged, gimlet-eyed fellow with curly red whiskers. "Chuck's ready. Get down and fall in."

"Ain't got time, I reck'n, Dick. Come to cut yo' herd."

"Is that so? Well, it's just about bedding time, and you can't cut it—tonight."

"Just want to ride through, quiet-like, and see if there's any E C Bar or Roman M stuff. If they ain't, we'll go back to our outfit. If there is, well—"

"You won't cut it at all. Most of them cattle is beef that we aim to drive to market, and I won't have nobody chousin' 'em to hell and runnin' the fat all off'n 'em. If they's any of yo' stuff in the herd, we'll work 'em out and throw 'em back on the range before we start the drive."

Now Old Emory Clayton could put up with almost anything, but to have a man steal his cattle and then try to play him for a sucker was a little too much. "Dick," said he, "you know me pretty well. I told you I aimed to cut that herd, and I'm goin' to do it. It's up to you whether it's cut peaceable, or—"

Sabin, who was standing on the ground near the chuck wagon, jerked his gun. He was only bluffing, but Pablo Villereal, who was standing just behind him, didn't know it. There was no one in the Box J outfit, except Pablo and his two *companeros*, that knew what Sam Merrill could do with a pistol. In Pablo's mind, it was good strategy to

put Sam out of the reckoning. So, without waiting for orders, he fired the first shot of the battle. The bullet went a little too low and a little too far to the right. It struck Merrill's ribs, under his left arm, and tore a hole in the flesh. It was as if Pablo had thrown a rock at a hornet's nest, and even as Sam reeled in his saddle his gun flipped from the holster. Pablo got a nice little round hole between his eyes for his trouble.

Sabin had only meant to make a gunplay, stall Clayton off until it was too dark to cut the herd, then turn the cattle loose in the night and let them drift. Come morning, Clayton could ride the range and get his cattle, but would be unable to say that Sabin had been holding them. He hated to lose the big steal he had made, but that would be better than a cold showdown with Em Clayton, for Old Man Em wasn't a quitter and Dick knew it.

Pablo had stolen Merrill's cattle for Sabin, and he supposed that Merrill had found it out in some manner and had come after him. He merely had kept his promise to himself that he would shoot first if it ever came to a showdown between him and Merrill. Anyway, he was with the Box J outfit and had fired the first shot, so the fight was on. There was no time for Sabin to protest that he was not responsible, that it was some old quarrel between Merrill and his former foreman.

The two *vaqueros*, seeing Pablo fall, jerked their guns and opened on Merrill. Each scored a hit, but neither reached a vital spot. In two ticks of a clock Merrill's gun flashed twice; they both went down. Seeing the matter had gotten entirely out of his hands and there was going to be a real fight, Sabin sprang behind the wagon and opened fire. Two of Clayton's men fell from their saddles.

Old Man Em hadn't come for a fight; he had come for his cattle. The other side had the advantage, and Sabin's gang was likely to wipe out his little band. Whirling his horse, he dashed toward the herd, Merrill at his side and clinging to his saddle horn like a wounded squirrel clinging to a limb, while the remaining eight men of their outfit followed close behind them, bullets from the camp

whistling around them as they rode. Clayton wasn't exactly running away from a fight. What he wanted was to get the Box J men away from the protection of that wagon and fight them in the open. To menace the herd was the surest way to get them out. His tactics worked, and hurriedly mounting, the Box J gang came thundering after them to head them off from the herd. Clayton's little band had reached the edge of the herd when Sabin's men came up and opened fire on them. Sam Merrill's horse was killed, but he managed to fall clear and tug his long Winchester from the saddle scabbard. He couldn't stand so he tumbled over behind his dead horse.

Hearing the shots, the six men who were riding herd came tearing around to see what the trouble was—and incidentally to keep from being run over by the stampeding herd, the thunder of whose hoofs could now be heard in the distance as they ran toward the Little Lometa arroyo and on into the roughs to be scattered and lost. Thus Clayton's little bunch of men was surrounded by a force that numbered two to one, right out in the open prairie. Sabin's men were not pressing the fight but were firing from a distance with Winchesters, while Clayton's men were armed with six-shooters. Two more of Clayton's men went down, wounded, and then Sam Merrill's gray face and his Winchester appeared above the body of the dead horse. The gun cracked, and a Box J man slid from his saddle. On it went, methodically, and at each shot there was damage in Sabin's ranks. When Sabin himself threw up his hands and pitched to the ground, his men broke and fled. The fight was over, and it was time. As Merrill had fired the shot that got Sabin and stopped the battle, a bullet struck a rock, glanced, whined over the dead horse and plowed its way across Merrill's scalp. He slipped down behind the breastworks of horseflesh and lay still.

Five of Clayton's men, including himself, were untouched. Some of the wounded could ride and lead a horse carrying dead or wounded. The grim old frontiersman hastily arranged matters, and the broken little cav-

alcade set off toward the E C Bar camp on the Little Lometa.

Sam Merrill wasn't one of the dead, but, in addition to having his side torn to rags and the crease in his head which had finally knocked him out, he had a bullet in the fleshy part of one leg.

At the camp Clayton loaded the wounded into the wagon, and with the cook to drive pushed on to the ranch house, leaving the other four to bury the dead.

When Sam Merrill finally quit raving with the delirium of fever in his wounds, he slept the clock around, then woke and looked about him. He was in a strange bed and in a strange house. He looked at a vacant chair by his bedside and opened and closed his eyes. There ought to be a woman in that chair. Where was she? It was too much trouble to puzzle over it. He put up one hand weakly and ran it over his face. There were a lot of whiskers there.

"Huh! Grew mighty quick—shaved yesterday—no matter—tired," he mumbled, and went to sleep again.

The following day, after Sam had taken nourishment two or three times and felt like smoking, Old Man Em, who was sitting by his bed, looked at him in a peculiar manner.

"Merrill, I got to know something," he said.

"All right, if I can tell you."

"What made you tell me you didn't know anything about the cow business?"

"I didn't. I took my first lesson from you, and the tuition was pretty high."

"How the hell did you learn to inhale powder smoke without coughing? Where'd you get the gun-slinging habit? Where'd you get the nerve to stand in the middle of a gun fight and act like you was at a croquet party? And where'd you get them old gunshot scars that's on yo' body?"

"Steady! You'll run it over if you don't look out," grinned Sam Merrill.

Old Man Em was in no humor for joking. Here was one of the worst gunmen he ever had seen, and he had seen several, not to mention the fact that he could shoot some himself. The fellow had deliberately let Sabin steal him out. What was the idea? Did he want to get Sabin? If that was it, he had got what he wanted, but why in time hadn't he shot Sabin at the start? Old Man Em wanted to know about this fellow, and he wanted to know right now. He wanted a neighbor that had sand—not that Dick Sabin's gang ever would give any more trouble, but on general principles. Still, there could be too much of a good thing. He never had been bad about asking too many questions about a man's past, but he'd like for this fellow to come clean with him.

Sam Merrill was watching the expression on the old ranchman's face and reading his thoughts accurately. Presently, his eyes began to twinkle. "Mr. Clayton, did it ever occur to you that a man can be pretty smart about a lot of things and still be an awful fool about some one thing?" he asked.

"Yes, I reck'n so. Now me, I know the cow business, but I'm pretty green about everything else. Still, when a fellow knows part of the cow business as well as you do—"

"How can I learn the rest?" interrupted Merrill. "I'm going to learn it. About the powder smoke and the bullet scars and the like, I can explain easily enough. I happened to be over in Africa when the Boer War broke out. I thought it would be fine to enlist. I did, and that's where I got the bullet scars, learned to inhale smoke, as you call it, and all that. Afterward I hunted some in the African jungles, then came back to America, where I was born. About a year ago I took a notion that I wanted a frontier ranch. I stopped at San Gregario. This was about the wildest place I had seen and I wanted it wild, so I bought that ranch, clear out of the world. I didn't know a thing about the business. When I lost my cattle I knew the cats hadn't eaten them, but I had no idea where they could be. Then you showed me. The American frontier is the only

place on earth, I suppose, where cattle are herded with six-shooters. That was the thing I didn't know."

"Huh! Now that you know it, you ought to make one more damn good herder," commented Old Man Em dryly.

"Perhaps so, but it's too late. I have no cattle to herd."

"Hell you ain't got cattle! After the smoke blowed away, my boys worked the Box J range with a fine-tooth comb. They threwed nine hundred Roman M's back on yo' range. You lost some, but I've seen a blizzard get a bigger percentage than that. I put Dave and some more fellows up there to look after 'em ontel you get on yo' feet again."

A few days later Sam Merrill tottered out onto the broad gallery and sat for hours looking out across the valley and studying things over. Unless he missed his guess, he had been just about ready to pass over to the other side of the mystic veil. Somebody had nursed him through, and brought him back. Who was it? Certainly not the horny-handed old ranchman. Where'd he get the idea that there ought to be a woman in that chair, when he came out of his long coma? Then he recalled the first day he had come to the ranch house. His face flushed at thought of the girl giggling at his ignorance. He wondered if that was the woman in the chair. In the midst of these thoughts he looked up and saw Nellie Clayton standing in the door. She looked pale, and it seemed to him she was thinner than when he had seen her that day at the dinner table.

"Good morning, Mr. Merrill," she said. "How are you this morning?"

"Fine, fine! How are you, Miss Clayton?"

"Oh, I feel a lot better. I was just—just—"

"Why, have you been ill?"

"No, I—I—you—" and Nellie colored and broke down.

"You mean you wore yourself out nursing me and had to go to bed? Is that why I haven't seen you since I came back to life?"

"Yes," she said softly, "but that wasn't anything. I might have gotten sick anyway."

"It was a whole lot! I have an idea that I'd be in the Happy Hunting-Ground right now but for that nursing. I wasn't worth it!"

As if she disliked to dispute his word or to agree with him as to his probable value, Nellie turned the conversation to other subjects. She sat with him for an hour, and when she was gone he made the mental note that she was a devilish fine girl and that it was a pity she giggled—though he hadn't heard her giggle that morning.

Merrill sat on the old gallery many days after that. In fact, for some reason he kept right on convalescing, even after he knew he was well and able to go back to his ranch. Sometimes Old Man Em sat with him, and when he did Sam was always listening for a giggle at his ignorance of the customs of the cow country, but he never heard it. He told himself Nellie was too human to giggle at a sick man, but she must know he was well now. In time, he came to wish he could hear that giggle again. It had caused him to buck up, go with Clayton, and try to get his cattle back. True, it had almost caused his death, but no matter; he'd rather hear it than always be expecting it.

Then, one evening just as the sun was setting and the gorges across the valley were filling with purple shadows, he heard that giggle again. He and Nellie had been sitting on the gallery for hours, talking in low tones. He had been telling her of his thoughts on that first day he had come to the Clayton ranch: how he had felt that he was down and out; that he was hopeless and had started on to drift about the world, and then—

"But, you see, you just thought those things," she interrupted. "It was a state of mind. You still have your ranch and your cattle. You can go back and make good in spite of that little bit of bad luck. You'll soon forget—"

"No, I'll never forget," he answered. "It is a state of mind that's troubling me right now. I don't think I want to go back, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you'll go with me. You can't help knowing that I want you."

Somehow Nellie got into his arms and was telling him the best she could that she wanted to go with him, considering he wouldn't stop kissing her long enough for her to talk connectedly. Right in the midst of the happy scene Sam heard someone walking on tiptoes in the main big room, which was just behind them. He sprang away, with flushed face, just as that prolonged, gurgling giggle ended with "*Muy loco.*" Nellie didn't seem the least bit concerned over the interference. Sam caught his breath and was just congratulating himself that it was at least not Nellie who was the family giggler, when the voice of Old Man Em roared out:

"Pedrol!"

"*Si senor.*"

"Didn't I tell you to keep that damned—"

"*Yo muy malvado, senor! Pescaroso mucha.* Yo no letta heem out. He brek a da streeng," jabbered Pedro, the Mexican cook.

"What's the row back there?" asked Sam, looking sheepish.

"Dad's bawling Pedro out for letting his parrot come into the house. While you were sick, he told Pedro if he saw it in the house again he'd kill it," and she settled back comfortably against his shoulder.

Another pepleless April morning found Judge Alamarine Wotterson sitting in front of his office. He was wondering what had become of the man to whom he had sold the Haunted Ranch which had become his meal ticket for three years. A lanky, hungry-looking cowboy rode into town, dropped off his horse, nodded to the judge, took the other chair, and rolled a smoke.

"You played hell when you sold that old Pendleton ranch the last time," he offered.

"How come I made a bad play like that?" the judge asked. "Is that hombre dead?"

"No, he ain't dead. He ain't got sense enough to stay dead when he's killed. Besides that, he's got something the matter with his gun hand. He lets Pablo steal his stuff and

turn it over to the Box J. Then he rides over, shoots up Dick, Pablo, and two more, and cripples the rest of the outfit, except me."

"Hu-m! I thought that fellow didn't have as much cow sense as a Norman horse. That takes away my visible means of support. The old Pendleton place was the only land in this country that was ever for sale. Reck'n I got to move," and the judge heaved a ponderous sigh and settled back more deeply into his chair as the cowboy trotted on down the street to the nearest saloon.



Half a Scalp

By Charles Tenney Jackson

DEPUTIES MAHAFFY AND MOFFETT waited in the shadow of the concrete irrigation flume just below the point of the black rock where the Los Gatos road bent sharply between the canyon wall and a sheer drop of 200 feet into the creek bed. It was a good spot to halt a lone bad man coming down into this trap from Starrett's camp. Rounding the rock he would stand sharply in the clear desert moonlight with every move outlined while the officers covered him with their guns from the shade of the cliff.

Deputy Mahaffy of Francey County, North Carolina, shoved the steel cuffs back into his overcoat pocket for the fourth time and hunched nervously around where he could see Deputy Moffett of San Andreas, Arizona. The big automatic on his hip worried his rheumatic leg, too, for Mr. Mahaffy was not used to shooting-irons.

Deputy Moffett spat into the road dust and listened to Deputy Mahaffy rehearse this job in a husky whisper.

"All I want, mister, is for you to stand by till I git this prisoner loaded on that eastbound train that goes through your town at four-fifty-five tomorry mornin'. He might be a pretty bad Injun to handle. Now, back in Ca'lina, up on the Big East Fork o' Little Pigeon River, we got good Injuns, mostly. They come into town from the Great Smoky reservation selling galax and Christmas greens, and some o' those old bucks I'd divide my last scalp with.

"But this here Pete Johnny I come out West to arrest, he sure broke loose on the warpath last summer. Shoots up the town and, when they gits him in jail, durned if he don't clout the turnkey over the head, climb out and wing the constable, and break for the timber. Nobody ever see him since."

"Fannin' two guns?" inquired Deputy Moffett profes-

sionally.

"Folks back there can't understand it yet. This Pete Johnny was goin' to the Cherokee school when he ups and declares himself. Fur as anybody figgered it was a Wild West medicine show started him off. This show was on a vacant lot jest back o' the co'thouse, peaceful as could be. The old doc was ballyhooin' his tonic, and his bunch o' Sioux and Apaches was poundin' kettle drums and giving a war dance.

"This little Pete Johnny listens awhile in the crowd and then he ups and begins to shoot. He has two old German Luger pistols he got somewhere. The dang fool sure busts up that show. The tent catches fire and the hull town has to turn out volunteers or we'd lost the Fust Baptist church and Levy's Emporium, too. Meantime this Pete Johnny chases them Apaches 'way up in the bresh on Chunky Gal Mountain. Some of 'em never turned up yet.

"The constable gathers Pete in; but he never would say what was eatin' on him. He sits in his cell broodin' a couple o' hours and then produces another big gun somewhere and breaks jail. Looks to me, now, like he'd come out here to Arizony lookin' for more o' them Apaches."

Deputy Moffett drew his white brows close in a frown over his frosty eyes and bit himself off a chew ere he answered. "Apaches—them is hard Injuns, brother. What kind o' Injun did you say this hombre was?"

"They tell me he was a Delaware, mebbe."

"Sounds like some kind o' grapes to me."

"Well, mebbe not. Our Great Smoky Cherokees is kind o' mixed. Mebbe he was a Wyandotte."

"Sounds like some kind o' chicken to me. You say he runs them Sioux and Apaches clean up in the bresh and nobody seen 'em since? Now, Apaches is tough Injuns, brother."

"Pete Johnny runs 'em clean out o' Nawth Ca'lina."

"You got," retorted Mr. Moffett curtly, "to show me. Our Injuns don't run so durn easy. 'Taint natural. What I figger is that this buck o' yourn jest went plum' loco."

"Clean fitified in the head, I reckon. Now Sheriff Tom

Floyd, back in Francey County, never would have got track o' this buck if he hadn't been correspondin' with Sheriff Beasley o' yore county. When Mr. Floyd finds Pete Johnny is hangin' round this irrigation work camp up there, shootin' craps for a livin', he sends me right out to fetch him back. In a way, you might say, Depitty, it's the first big job the country ever handed me in nigh thirty years an' more."

The Arizona officer looked the Carolina officer over carefully. In a way he thought that Deputy Mahaffy resembled himself as Deputy Moffett had glimpsed his own person in the specky glass of the washroom in the county courthouse basement. In a way, an onlooker might have noticed this resemblance, also.

Deputy Mahaffy was white of hair and smooth-shaven. Deputy Moffett was white of hair but with a silvery, tobacco-stained mustache. Deputy Mahaffy moved heavily and with a sort of creaky care of his legs, as if 30 years in a swivel chair had made him sot and settled.

Deputy Moffett felt that way himself. His old gray eyes peered out from under shaggy brows to meet an equally kindly, wistful look in the blue eyes of the Carolina man. Thirty years of patient service in the San Andreas county courthouse, Mr. Moffett had seen. Somehow he felt as if he had missed something. The Great West had passed him by.

Wild days, colorful years of badmen, fighting sheriffs, rollicking cowpunchers and turbulent miners—all had come and gone like a dream while old Mr. Moffett thumbed records and filed documents in the little back room of the offices where sheriff after sheriff had come and served and gone his way.

He felt now that he never could visualize himself as a man hunter, and, when he looked Deputy Mahaffy over, the Carolinian seemed just a stooped elderly office man, not at all easy with a gun in his belt or a pair of steel cuffs in his pocket to be snapped on the wrists of any wild young badman coming down this lonely road in the moonlight.

Moffett wrinkled up his cheek with a slight cough to cover some slight perturbation about this outlaw business. "Well, brother, our Injuns is tough Injuns. Now if yore papers is right this bad hombre you want has been hangin' round Starrett's camp two weeks. Waitin' for payday, mebbe. When them greasers git their hides full o' *mescal*, pay nights them joints is no place for any grapejuice Injun."

"Accordin' to information and belief," announced Mr. Mahaffy importantly, "my Injun stops over in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and cleans out a bunch o' big rich oil Injuns in a crap game. Then he heads west huntin' fur trouble. He had ought to be along here right soon if yore sheriff fixed it up right for us to git him."

"You'll git him. Depitty, you ever been West before?"

"Well, in a way—no." Deputy Mahaffy reflected on it. "I was raised right there in Francey County. Thirty-five years in the co'thouse. Mostly I served processes and acted as bailiff when co't was in session. Once they sent me to Johnson City, Tennessee, to git a piano back that a woman hadn't paid for. You ever been East, Depitty?"

"Well, in a way you might say I was thar once," rejoined Mr. Moffett. "Fourteen year ago they sent me to El Paso, Texas, to git a bumner that jumped his board bill at the Frisco House. But mostly I been depitty and water collector. Now, aside from Injuns, what kind o' mountains you got back East around Chicago and them places?"

"I'm a S'uthen man. But speakin' o' mountains I could show you laurel back o' Chunky Gal you couldn't push an Arizony goat into."

"I ain't speakin' o' goats." Deputy Moffett eased himself off the ridge which his .45 was cutting in his hip and pointed off through the moonlight to the white glimmer of a peak far to the south, across the canyon. "Now, mountains! Thar's old San Pedro—slants up pretty nigh to eleven thousand feet, brother."

"Well, mebbe Chunky Gal she ain't so high but le' me tell you she's just as wide. What kind o' likker you got

outen this Western country?"

"It'd tear the tacks right off a Ca'lina man's shoes."

"We got cawn likker back on the East Fork," retorted Mr. Mahaffy slowly, "that'd eat holes right through this plaster ditch you and me are backed up against. Then there's gun-shootin'. Ever hear out this way o' 'Devil Anse' Hatfield or mebbe some o' them McCoys?"

"Thar was so many badmen fannin' and foggin' up the air out here, brother, that we couldn't hear nothin' east o' Coffeerville, Kansas." Mr. Moffett eased around testily and looked up the silent road. In that moonlight you could see a man's teeth to the turn of the rocks. In a way, he was anxious for this renegade young gunman from Ca'lina to come down that road and, then, in a way, he wasn't.

He wondered how this Carolina officer could shoot? Mr. Moffett himself was loath to admit that this big .45 on his hip felt out of place and in all his long tenure of office no sheriff had ever seen fit to start him off on a badman hunt. In a way Deputy Moffett felt that Sheriff Beasley, even today, had delegated him to accompany the Carolina deputy to go pick up the fugitive because the sheriff thought that old man Moffett had been poring too hard over record books and figures in the county courthouse and needed a week-end off up in the hills to get the air.

The sheriff had even arranged the arrest, as it were, from the San Andreas courthouse, by telephoning to the camp boss of the irrigation project telling him to ask the suspect to go down the Los Gatos road tonight to call at the railroad station for a supposed telegram. Deputy Moffett hadn't understood till he and the Carolina officer had gone 16 miles out on the road in the buckboard that this Injun Pete Johnny was a real badman, a gun-fightin' breed and a jail breaker who had put two officers down for the count when he started to leave the Tarheel state.

Then, there were certain little things that cropped out while Deputy Sheriff Moffett jogged the 16 miles with Deputy Sheriff Mahaffy. They had argued everything

they knew the first two hours of the man hunt—pot liquor greens, hog, and hominy versus sourdough and dutch-oven biscuits; blockade popskull versus Mexican *mescal*; the height, width, and thickness of the Great Smokies versus the San Francisco Range; the exploits of Kit Carson compared to Daniel Boone's.

But there was one thing which Mr. Moffett had hoped and desired, and that was that Deputy Mahaffy of Franceyville, Carolina, was a good gun-shooting officer who could drop his man, belt-shooting, with an eyelash draw, at 40 paces, if need be.

Mr. Mahaffy wasn't. Mr. Mahaffy had come to the Southwest fully expecting that the Arizona authorities would provide him with a good man and true in the way of an officer who had grown up in the saddle cracking down outlaws, with two guns working, four at a pop. Not for worlds did the deputy from Carolina wish the deputy from Arizona to know that the county had sent him on this quest to bring Injun Pete Johnny home because the supervisors thought he deserved a vacation with pay after serving 35 years as court crier and summoner of delinquent taxpayers.

In a way each felt that he had been buncoed as they sat against the wall by the roadside waiting for this renegade to walk into the trap. Some 30 years for each, doddering over musty courthouse chores, just hadn't put Deputies Moffett and Mahaffy in the class of those famed sheriffs and town marshals of the old frontier. But now each felt that the big chance had come. Clothed with full authority to make arrest, out on the man trail, neither wanted to go back without some excitement.

Deputy Moffett was even hoping—in a way—that this dang-fool Indian from the East would put up some kind of a fight. Mr. Moffett felt that any Arizona brave would. Not that he knew much about them, for they were all herded away at the far end of the State from the peaceful seclusion of the San Andreas courthouse, where he had rounded out 30-odd years of public service.

The Carolina officer felt much the same way. After lis-

tening two hours to Deputy Moffett's loftiness about badmen of the Southwest he thought that Injun Pete Johnny, who had jumped the Great Smoky reservation, ought to show some stuff for the natives out here in the West.

"Well," muttered Mr. Moffett, "he ought to be along. The camp boss said he'd start him down this road so's you could pick him up alone with none of them greasers interferin'. Personally, I think this bad Injun o' yours got all his idees o' the war trail out o' the movies and readin' them cowboy magazines. I read 'em myself right there in the San Andreas courthouse. Some of 'em's pretty good."

"Well, yes, I'll say so. But I don't see yet what hunch a Delaware Injun back East got to bust up an Apache Wild West show."

"You say he runs our bucks up in the brush?"

"The town marshal finds feathers and beads and buckskin fringe all up the Chunky Gal road. Pete Johnny runs 'em a mile."

Deputy Moffett considered this slowly. "Well, mebbe so. As I said as fur east as I got was El Paso, Texas. But one o' the boys in our office goes to Boston once to fetch back a check-passer. Well, sir, Collins says the East is a hell of a country. He says after the train left Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, they rushed and tromped over more damn two-by-four states than he ever tell of. He said he'd ask the peanut butcher, 'Where are we now?' The feller says, 'New Jersey.'"

"Collins takes a chaw and tries to spit out the winda in a tunnel and they tells him it was New York. The next flicker Collins knowed they was clean under this dang state and somebody hollers it was Connecticut."

"He gets up mad as hell in a couple o' hours when they slewed him around into Vermont and New Hampshire, and, by the time he gits into Maine where this check-passer had jumped, Collins was so fed up on states and statutes and limitations he packs his guns in a grip and comes back. No East for me, brother."

"Well, Ca'lina's different. We got a sight o' breshy

mountains back o' Chunky Cal. A badman could hide up in back and the hull gove'ment couldn't git him out. Out here in the West you got too many dang motor roads and scenery hotels. Pete Johnny might have been mighty disappointed if he was lookin' fur trouble."

"Hey?" queried Deputy Moffett testily, for he was getting stiff in the bones sitting against this cold concrete.

"Trouble? If this Ca'lina buck come West honin' for blood let him be. I'll steer him down on the border where Injuns is one hundred percent Americans. You can take him home then, what's left o' him and his hair, in a woman's war-paint box. It'll save yore state expenses."

"I'll take him home, skipper," retorted Mr. Mahaffy, "hear them cuffs jingle, hey? You just stand by, Depitty." Officer Mahaffy tinkled the cuffs in his pocket again with a hand that trembled slightly from the cold night. Then he stopped this noise and stared fixedly at the sharp turn of the road about the point of rocks. There, in the brilliant moonlight, stood a solitary figure. It had stopped a moment as if listening. Then it came on silently, the white dust jetting up at each quick step.

Deputies Mahaffy and Moffett slid up heavily against the wall.

"Thar's yore meat, brother," whispered Mr. Moffett hoarsely.

"Come on—" Deputy Mahaffy felt for his gun, but the belt had slid so that it was away around by his spine, under a buttoned-up overcoat. He glanced hurriedly at the granite-hard face of the Arizona officer.

Mr. Moffett's white mustache was working rapidly up and down in a mutter which the Carolina man could not understand at all. Then the Arizona deputy folded his arms resignedly and nodded to his companion: "Do yore stuff, brother," he said.

Officer Mahaffy had no time to figure his stuff. He stood in deep shadow, and this slender figure rounded the rock from bright moonlight squarely into him.

The thin brown face of Injun Pete Johnny registered instant surprise. His worn summer suit looked as if he had

slept in it for weeks. His plaid cap was powdered gray with alkali. His three-color socks and mountain-toed college shoes of mustard-yellow were unkempt as if he had found the war trail long and hard.

But his black eyes widened between rifts of black coarse hair hanging over his brow, the same shock of caveman hair that cheer leaders of Cherokee School No. 2 had seen many a day in 60-yard dashes from the forward pass, and the debating teams had watched gleaming slick with "Stayso" and combed straight back over his skull, hardly stirring a strand, even as Pete Johnny shrilly debated the Constitution or "Resolved that the beauties of Nature surpasss the beauties of Art."

He never moved as Deputy Sheriff Mahaffy's excited fingers closed down on his hard, slender arm. Then he murmured, "Excuse me, please."

"Hands up!" yelled Mr. Mahaffy.

"Excuse, please."

"Well, I'm damned!" roared Deputy Moffett.

"Gi' me that other hand, you!" Mr. Mahaffy circled for it while he struggled to get his steel cuffs out, but they had tangled in the lining of his pocket. So Pete Johnny merely waved his free arm in the air till Deputy Moffett seized it.

"Mebbe you don't remember me," said Mr. Mahaffy, "but if I'd been on duty at the jail 'stead o' the co'thouse that night, you'd never got a leg out o' Francey County."

Pete's brow had been wrinkling perplexedly. But now it cleared brightly as if he identified old Deputy Mahaffy with some forgotten episode of other days. "Oh, yes! Pretty good—all right," he said and grinned amiably.

The Arizona officer dropped his arm and stood back. "Well, if this Injun is a badman, then Billy the Kid was a Y. M. C. A. coffee slinger. Neve' mind yore cuffs, brother."

Deputy Mahaffy was still jerking them in the ragged lining of his coat. Then he started grumbling.

"All right, Pete. But understand, you come along. Hear me?"

"All right. Pretty good," said Pete Johnny. His black

eyes began to narrow as if a second thought had hit him. He ripped out something that might have been a string of cuss words which would sour all the grapes in Delaware. And he stared down into the misty moonlit valley at the few twinkling lights as if that second thought was troublesome.

The thing was that Pete Johnny was shy. He could run and yell war whoops on the gridiron and massacre the English language in quick, nervous staccato when he had to recite; but when Pete Johnny got out where men were men, especially big, rugged white men, he lost both speech and nerve, completely. He looked these two over doubtfully. By this time they had both squirmed their gun belts around where they could be utilized in emergencies. Pete Johnny noted the moves.

"Pleased to meet you," he added deferentially.

The Arizona officer turned to the Carolina man. "Brother, I see I was wrong. Come to think, Delaware ain't grapes. It's peaches."

Deputy Mahaffy pulled his automatic halfway out, showed it; then he shoved it in the holster. "Well, I got him, didn't I? Come two thousand miles and picked my man up easy!"

"Thinkin' again," reflected Mr. Moffett, "mebbe Delaware ain't peaches. Seems like Collins said it was a railroad."

Mr. Mahaffy grunted victoriously. "Railroad, that's what I'm pinin' to see. Git your buckboard, Mr. Moffett. I'll sleep better when this man is eastbound, sittin' next to the winda." Then he turned to the prisoner. "Pete, it was a long run you made after you broke out the co'thouse basement cell. I'll say you flittered fast."

"How is eve'body?" said Injun Pete Johnny hopefully.

"The turnkey got out the hospital three weeks before I left. They thought his skull was busted. Constable Ott that you winged out in the alley—for a while he was despaired of. How did it happen you had two big German pistols when you started amok?"

"Two in my pants," smiled Pete. "Firs' time only one

they took. All was excitement."

"I'll say there was. How come you shoot up a medicine show?"

Peter grinned. "I was on my way to church, excuse me—"

"Well dang my eyes!" roared Deputy Moffett. "Mister, load this animal on the rig. You'll have to hire a wet nurse for him afore you git to Kansas City. Bad Injun—I got a kid o' sixteen in high school that could herd a whole band o' war braves like thissen back to the reservation."

"Halfback?" inquired Pete as if he ought to make conversation.

"Oh, hell," growled Mr. Moffett, "bring him on. You can read yore warrant when we get to town by a stove. Git in the back seat with him, mister. Didn't find no guns nor knives, did you? No, sir, this badman would hurt himself if he had weapons."

Deputy Mahaffy clung to Pete's arm till he got him into the buckboard seat. Deputy Moffett swung his portly bulk in front. Mr. Mahaffy was on the same side, and the two rotund old officers weighed it down to the springs while Injun Pete Johnny's 118 pounds of bone and sinew jounced high in the air.

Mr. Moffett flicked his horses and they trotted down the white dust of the curving road. Presently he heaved a sigh and turned to look at the two behind him. Half a mile down toward the shining alkali flats the Arizona man sighed again.

"In a way, mister, I'm disappointed. What you said made me believe we was in for a real old-time Injun fight. I'll admit I never seen one. Our Injuns been rounded up now so dang long that if it wasn't for the tourist business I reckon folks'd never see any. What gits my nanny is this, and I'll be free to say so, now this dang battle has flittered out flat on its neck. I been depitty under fourteen sheriffs in the last thirty years and I never was give a job that was wuth a popgun cap fur excitement. Yeh see?"

The Carolina man leveled snow-white brows at Mr.

Moffett's leathery old cheek. Then he nodded with a sigh. "Sheriff, I understand you. Beats all how a good man gets stalled in some rusty old place in a co'thouse, and folks never know he's livin'. I swear I come West hopin' you people'd show me stuff like we read about."

"You can't get no jolt out of a dang badman like this."

"No. Pete Johnny disapp'inted me. The rookus he raised back there, I sure thought he'd make a holler anyhow."

"He's a hell of a misfire, all right. I sure hate to go back into town with him and you after the talk you peddled about what a fast-fannin' son-of-a-gun he was. Them college shoes and all."

Pete Johnny listened silently. He looked down at his dusty legs once and then glanced at his two bulky guards.

Deputy Mahaffy leaned forward to Deputy Moffett's shoulder. "I've a big notion," he muttered, "when we get near town to snap the darbs on him. Husk off them shoes, too, and iron up his feet. We could tell 'em we had a mighty time shootin' it out with this man up in the rocks here. Who'd know anything about it?"

Mr. Moffett looked at him with frosty eyes. "The dang fool would spill the beans when we landed him in jail."

"He wouldn't git no chance. We can hustle him right on the train. Ironed and roughed up like he'd give us a bad time. Understand?"

Mr. Moffett tried to light his pipe with an aged, purple-blotched hand. Then his worn eyes fixed on a dim line across the arid flats. That was the railroad and, after passing the Jake Wells flag station, the motor road would follow it to San Andreas. "In a way," he grunted, "I see yore drift. A couple o' old depitties like you and me, we never had no chance to show what was in us. Under no sheriff did I ever have no chance. They just shoved me on to the book end o' the office years ago, and there I was. Fitch-ered, by swanny!"

"The minute you helped me load this Johnny on the train East, you could say anything to your office you wanted to," said Mr. Mahaffy indifferently. "I dunno as I'd ever hear of it. I can surprise the folks back at Fran-

ceyville myself if I bring this young shootin' buck home. Singlehanded. They wouldn't think it of me."

"Brother," said Mr. Moffett, reining up on the lines, "make it bad when you get home. I'll stand fur it. A fella, when he gits past his prime and ain't done nothin' much, he don't git no chance. Now after we pass this tank station le's tie this hombre up. Make it mean, brother. Run down in his tracks fannin' two guns. See?"

Deputy Mahaffy looked over his prisoner searchingly. Pete Johnny shivered in his faded hairline suit. But no Iroquois going to the stake ever set his features into more stolid, obstinate acceptance of fate. Pete Johnny acted as if he didn't care what happened to him now. He had had his big chance and fumbled it.

When the rig reached the sandy flats, with the dried washes of treeless creeks cutting down from the shadowy canyons of the foothills, Injun Pete Johnny looked back once. It was as if Pete felt he had left some important business unsettled up there and these two fussy captors had interfered with his program. But he hunched down against the night chill and hardly seemed aware of the garrulous conference as Deputy Mahaffy in the rear seat leaned forward to enlarge his views to Deputy Moffett in front.

"Well, now, friend, I see yer talkin'. It looked to me like a big thing when I started. Comin' West to run down this buck I figgered a lot on what the papers might say about it. Looked like the big chance for me; but the punch is clean taken out o' this by Pete himself. If we turned the varmint loose up the road we might git in a couple o' shots they could hear up at the Turley ranch when we passed it."

"You ain't aimin' to say we shoot him?"

"Hell, no! Fog up the dust around him and then holler 'hands up!'"

"The dang fool might keep a-runnin'. What kind o' shot are you, Depitty?"

"Well," grumbled Mr. Moffett, "I'm deaf in one ear but it didn't come from gun-shootin'. The fact is I never had

no use for a gun in the record office. I borried this off the city marshal when the sheriff told me to go and show you the way up to Starrett's camp. From what you say we ain't either of us dead on the draw."

"No. But I won't take no chance on this prisoner that-away. When we git in town to the depot— I'll put the irons on when we git warmed up. Buy him a ticket and hustle him on the train—he can't explain that he never put up no fight when we took him."

Deputy Moffett leaned his arm along the seat and tapped Mr. Mahaffy on the wrist.

Far away over the shining flats a bright light had suddenly flashed. It made the long, lonely row of telegraph poles gleam for an instant and then swept the little dark station house and water tank by the single siding track. When the buckboard jogged on in the white dust past the depot Mr. Moffett saw a single figure standing on the platform in the shadows. Up the switch he thought he saw another form which vanished to the dry ditch of the right-of-way.

"Somebody must be figgerin' on loadin' stock tomorry," he muttered, "or else flaggin' the train. But the agent lives a mile up the track. They don't have any night man at Jake Wells's station."

"Don't talk to 'em," cautioned Mr. Mahaffy. "If it's cow-boys, you know all they'll see is a dang college buck shiverin' his teeth out and lookin' no more like a desperado than I am."

"That's right, brother. No kick to it. There's a bunch o' hosses behind the loadin' chute with a man holdin' em. Jest don't take any notice of 'em, Depitty. I'm drivin' right through."

"Pete," ordered Deputy Mahaffy solemnly. "Straighten up. Git out o' that rabbit crouch. Show these Western folks you ain't jest a damn grapejuice Delaware. Pete, I bragged a lot on you since I started to trail you down."

Pete Johnny looked at him uncertainly. He lifted his dusty Scotch cap and scratched his black locks; then, his eyes fixed on that little group of horses just off the road

by the loading-pen. Four horses with empty saddles, and one rider whose cigarette tip glowed faintly under his gray high hat. When this man saw the buckboard rattling along through the dusty moonlight he never stirred.

That headlight of the westbound Transcontinental flashed again nearer, and the rumble of flying wheels arose on the desert night. The lone rider was watching the other way, toward the depot.

"Giddap," muttered Deputy Moffett and he reached for the nigh horse with his ragged whip. Deputy Mahaffy continued to lean forward, his right hand under Mr. Moffett's elbow so that any curious onlookers might not suspect that these were two man hunters returning from a complete fizzle so far as any real punch was concerned. "Giddap," repeated Mr. Moffett. "That's a complete stranger to me, partner, and I know 'em all in this county."

Deputy Mahaffy did not answer. He watched ahead as he felt a slight twist of the prisoner's knee touching his overcoat pocket.

Indian Pete Johnny was staring back at the lone horseman. He saw another man now, out on the main track beyond the station. This man was waving a lantern, and, even as he did, there came a slow screech and groan of slowing wheels on the long train sweeping across the moonlit flat. But Pete Johnny did not notice that nor the flagman with the lantern. Nor the other three figures strewn along the tracks. He was watching the man who was guarding the five horses by the stock chute. Pete's lean, long face grew longer. His black eyes bulged between the strands of jet hair over his brow. Once he muttered bewilderedly. The two officers paid no attention whatever.

Pete crouched forward, staring at Deputy Mahaffy's ear. Then he slipped to his feet like a ghost. He bent over Mr. Mahaffy's shoulder, fumbled a moment behind his back, and then he slumped right over the forward seat of the buckboard.

Just an instant. Something gleamed in his hands. Metal that he smashed down upon the astounded Carolina man's

arm. That arm he then jerked forward upon Mr. Moffett's arm. Then, as Mr. Mahaffy let out a startled whoop and the team sprang forward, Injun Pete Johnny did a complete back somersault out of the rig, landed on his feet behind it in the dust, straightened up, and dashed back up the road.

Mr. Mahaffy was struggling to turn while Deputy Moffett tried vainly to check the pitching team. He seemed mysteriously handicapped. The buckboard teetered, hung on two wheels, and then overturned, hurling the two officers into the ditch.

"Let go my arm!" yelled Moffett with his face in the sun-cracked mud. "I can't manage 'em this way! Let go!"

"Let go me," grunted Mr. Mahaffy. "I ain't got you."

"Cuffed!" roared Mr. Moffett. "The Injun steals the irons out o' yore coat and jams 'em on us both."

They twisted around and sat up. Mahaffy felt about his clothes with his free arm. "Got my gun, too. Got yours, hey? He was a slick one. To think we trusted that grin-nin' fool."

"Listen," panted Moffett. "Shootin' up at the station! Yore Injun has gone after them cattlemen waitin' for the train. Man, it's his finish! The sneakin' coyote!"

They got up, side by side, jerking at the cuffs which held them together. Then they stopped abruptly.

The train was grinding brakes in response to a lantern signal up at the lonely switch. But above this noise had come a shot. Two more and a chorus of yells and curses. The spurt of yellow flame came from the end of the wooden stock chute near the closed station.

"Man," gasped the Arizona deputy, "come on. Gun fight. I never yet in thirty years got a sight of a good one."

The prisoners got to the road and trudged along. The long train had stopped now. Dim lights gleamed in the Pullmans, but not a trainman was in sight. Crouched in the shelter of the stock chute, the two officers came upon Injun Pete Johnny. He was aiming carefully toward the locomotive where a lone figure stood firing back. Another man was vanishing into the sagebrush toward the hills.

But nearer, by the pen, a horse was down and a man was struggling feebly to free his leg from its weight. Another man sat against a post, coughing, and finally he stretched out with a weary moan.

Pete Johnny turned his pistol toward the man who was crawling from under the horse. The two deputies were behind him when he yelled at this one, who promptly stuck his hands up. The other horses milled around helplessly.

"I tol' you!" shouted Pete. "Up at the bunkhouse I tol' you politely, Mike."

"Git away, Injun!" yelled the other man. "Give me time."

Deputy Mahaffy blustered to his fellow prisoner. "Get a hand around in my left pants pocket and get my keys. Get this cuff off, mister!"

"Hold still," retorted Moffett. "This is a holdup. This gang was set on robbin' that express car. Flagged the train and started to clean up. They've all beat it, the bunch of 'em."

"Pete crashed in on 'em from behind," said Mahaffy. "Shot one down and killed a horse. Captured this one. Petel"

He yelled in a voice of authority just as Mr. Moffett succeeded in getting the cuff unlocked. Then Mahaffy strode toward Injun Pete Johnny. He beckoned toward Pete's gun.

"Excuse me, please," muttered Pete. "All right, but my money, please." He turned the pistol over reluctantly to Deputy Mahaffy.

"Line up these two guys," said Mr. Moffett. "That one is shot through the shoulder. This one's nigh got a busted leg—the horse fell on him. What's it all about, Pete?"

"Money, please," urged Pete. "I saw Mike the Ike on this horse when we passed. He no good so I chase him."

The larger of the two prisoners glowered at Injun Pete and then faced the two deputies. "This bird has been fol-lerin' me the last two months to git back eighty dollars I took off him back East. I told him last week if he'd stay

off me I'd give him his dough to make him shut his yawp."

"It was the Baptis' young people's church money," explained Pete. "I was treasurer. One night he stingle me in a game—"

"Back in Ca'lina?" said Mr. Mahaffy. "What the hell!"

"No cussin', please," said Pete. "I was Baptis' young people."

"Grapejuice!" yelled Mr. Moffett. "I told you so, Dep-itty! There comes the trainmen. Turn these two hombres over to 'em. Well, say, this is a holdup, hey? Thirty years I was in office and durned if I ever got sight or smell o' one."

He suddenly looked at his fellow officer meaningly. The three trainmen were hurrying on with lanterns. When the larger prisoner saw them he began to speak hurriedly to Moffett.

"Listen, skipper. I seen you in San Andreas this summer. You're a deputy sheriff all right. Now, listen. I'll come clean. I don't know much about this train job. I'm an Eastern man, bo. This Daley crowd who framed this stickup, they pulled me into this. Jest to hold horses for 'em. I was broke, up at the contractor's camp, with this Injun pesterin' me to give him back his eighty dollars. He jest drove me desperate follerin' me around with his yammer. I'd bumped him off if I'd had a chance."

"How'd you rob him back in Franceyville, Ca'lina?"

"I never robbed him. I was driftin' along with 'Doc' Altmeyer's medicine show last summer when I meets this buck. I was the big Apache chief; mebbe this Ca'lina man remembers? Well, one night in a cigar store I shakes this Injun down for his jack. He thought he could guess them old peas—"

"Trimmed him out o' his church money?" said Mahaffy.

"Mister, I'm ashamed o' that shell-and-pea stuff. It was like crackin' the baby's bank. Well, this Injun goes away and studies out that he'd been flimflammed. He trails me around wantin' his money back. Of course, I gave him the air; then, last day o' the show he starts his stuff.

"Me and 'Slim' Ross and the half-breed, 'Canny'

Bridger, was in the tent all dolled up with our feathers and war paint, hittin' the kettle drums, when Injun Pete rises up in the audience. He works two old guns he'd borried somewhere. He pops one through Doc's silk hat. He drills one through the gasoline-torch tank. The tent catches fire and the riot was on."

"I'll say so," said Mr. Mahaffy. "The town'd lost the drug store and Levy's Emporium if the volunteers hadn't got out handy. All was excitement."

"We hit for the brush. Slim and me and Canny left fringe and beads clear over the ridge on a getaway. We jumped a freight and finally I got to Tulsa, Oklahoma. But one day up turns Injun Pete. Some canvasman o' Doc's show put him on my trail. Then I lit into Denver with a street carnival. Up turns Johnny after his money. Finally, I went up into this irrigation camp, dealin' a little stud. In walks Pete Johnny again. Then I hooks up with the Daley bunch and along comes this dang-fool Injun in your buckboard to bust us up. What's eatin' on him?"

"Well," put in Mr. Moffett, "I heard o' the Daleys. They hang out up on the San Remon headwaters. Bad outfit, mister."

Mike the Ike took a hurried glance at the trainmen. "Say, Deputy, I gave you the lowdown on this. Now when I come up before the judge, say what you can for me, will you?"

"You close yore dang trap," said Moffett. "Hear me? You ought to swing, you had. Mr. Mahaffy, let me go talk to them trainmen."

Mr. Mahaffy swung his gun on the two prisoners. Pete Johnny shivered in the cold desert air and turned to the Carolina officer.

"All right, pretty good. I was all gone of the church money. That gambling with three shells—very nice, but crooked. I was very mad. When they arrest me for shooting at Mike I was madder. In jail I was more madder. Excuse me for jumping out, but I understood I was embezzler for the Baptist young people, and how I get money back if I not follow Mike the Ike?"

"You busted them Daley boys wide open," said Mr. Mahaffy. "Now in a way, Pete, I'm proud o' you. Grape-juice Injun, hey?"

Mr. Moffett was coming back. The train crew were around the wounded outlaw and Mike, who had grown silent as a clam.

"They'll load these hombres on the train," said Moffett. "Take 'em to San Andreas and turn 'em over to the law. The sheriff'll have posses out before daylight to round up the three that got away. Git 'em, too, for them Daleys on foot in the dry hills ain't got a chance when the boys phone Starrett's camp and the outfit comes down to head 'em off. Say, this Injun was bad medicine."

"He's still hollerin' for the Baptist young folks' money."

Mr. Moffett suddenly beckoned to his fellow officer. "He don't know yet exactly what it's all about. Come on, brother, and bring him. I got to git my team untangled back there."

Pete came along, after one reluctant stare at Mike. The prisoners were on the train by the time the Arizona officer had his buckboard right side up and the team in place.

The train was moving before he spoke earnestly to the Carolina deputy. "Mr. Mahaffy, have you any idees about all this mess?"

"I never had so much excitement in all my born days."

"Same here. You're like me, jest an old office grubber that your sheriffs kept settin' in a frayed old chair back there in the county courthouse. When there was rough work to do they just overlooked you and me. Well, sir, as I see it now, we had our big gun fight, didn't we?"

"We certainly saw the fur fly for once in our lives. But it was Pete Johnny who busted up this train robbery."

"Excuse me," murmured Pete, "my mistake."

"Oh, dang his hide," moaned Mr. Moffett. "Git in, folks. I figure we'll git the money now to square up the eighty dollars he lost in that shell game. So he can pay back the Baptist treasury and swear off on gamblin' with showmen. And I take it your sheriff back home and the judge

and all could be brought to see that him shootin' up the jail and wingin' a warden was just kind of a cat-fit, when he sees his fix."

"They wouldn't treat him hard. Send him to the gove'-ment school mebbe, but that's what he's yearnin' and pinin' to do, anyhow, so's he can play football again. I'd speak for him."

"Pete," demanded Mr. Moffett, "would you be willin' to call this war off that you come West and started agin the paleface? Big Injun, Pete."

"Excuse me," repeated Pete uncertainly. "Pretty good."

"What we got to do now," went on Mr. Moffett, "is jest kind o' keep this Injun from grabbin' the spotlight. If he gits a good whack out o' the job, he's satisfied. You understand me, Depitty?"

Mr. Mahaffy climbed in by Pete Johnny's side. "In a way I do," he answered. "Yes, sir, two old stuffy codgers, like you and me, shut up in the back rooms of the sheriffs' offices all our lives. Now, Pete's a young fella. He's got a big career, mebbe. But you and me—"

The Carolina man stopped wistfully. The Arizona man was staring ahead, his gray brows thickened over his tired old eyes. The sun was coming up over the distant ranges. Pink and silver bursting through golden bands, with the bleak mountains giving up their deep purple gorges to a veil of misty light. Nearer, the unbroken sage and alkali flats began to take on form and color. The team jogged on along the line of telegraph poles. The two old officers watched the splendor. On the far ridge the few clouds seemed to shift so that phantom figures rode again.

The Old West of splendid adventure glowed in the morning; the shaven poll of a brave with scalp lock dangling as he urged on his painted pony; gallant riders of the Santa Fé trail, long-haired and buckskin-clad; the jog of dirty canvassed wagons with prospectors and settlers westing with the long trail from the rising sun.

The phantoms rode on with the light and faded with it. The two patient old hearts had never seen the wonders of it all nor felt the thrill. The great tumult of America

had passed them by as they pored over musty records of petty things.

Two miles out from the first alfalfa green about the pretty town of San Andreas the Arizona deputy sighed.

"Well, sir, this is the end. I'm dang glad I met you."

"Same here. Say, Pete, you gone asleep?"

Pete straightened up and grinned at them.

"Pete, this big day don't mean nothin' more to you than you git your eighty dollars back and fix up yore trouble back in Car'lina, does it? I'll say you're a man! Now, if anything comes right out o' this mess, I figure we split three ways. How about it, Mr. Mahaffy?"

"Yes, sir. And Pete, you ain't goin' to stand in our way, are you? It wouldn't mean nothin' to you—but a couple o' old depitties like me and Mr. Moffett here, you understand?"

"Pretty good," grinned Pete. "Every time. You catch 'em."

"We'll put him up at the best hotel," said Mr. Moffett. "And you and him stick around a week till we see what's what. There's my sheriff now, over by the depot. He'll be glad to meet one o' them fightin' mountain officers from Car'lina that we've read about. I'm a Western man myself."

Two weeks later, High Sheriff Tom Floyd of Franceyville, North Carolina, grabbed his hat one morning and rushed down the dingy courthouse corridor to shake a newspaper under the county recorder's nose.

"Boys!" he yelled. "Listen to this—you remember I sent Old Man Mahaffy out on a wild-goose chase after that Indian student that started the riot last summer. I never expected old Jim Mahaffy would find his man. Just thought Jim was entitled to a vacation on county money after the years he's put in for us on a janitor's wages. Old Mahaffy was always dreamin' that some day he'd see the West before he died. Yes, sir, and he grew old always hankerin' after gunplay and some big job that he was no more fit to handle than a baby. But just read this here item in an

Atlanta paper, will you?"

It was no more than brief reprint, wandering on a wire out of the Great Southwest:

San Andreas, Ariz., Nov. 22.—Rewards totaling \$12,000 will be paid to Deputies J. M. Mahaffy and A. T. Moffett, according to state and railroad officials, for their activities leading to the capture of the Daley gang, members of which have been convicted of the recent attempted hold-up of the Transcontinental train, near here.

Old-time law officers of the border say that the courage and fidelity of these two veteran deputies in attacking the outlaws, who outnumbered them three to one, was an exploit that ranks with the best traditions of the Old West. Deputy Mahaffy was presented with a gold watch by the San Andreas Chamber of Commerce last night at a banquet given him before he departed for his old home in Franceyville, North Carolina.

Among those present was Pete Johnny, the young Cherokee Indian student who furnished the clue upon which Deputies Moffett and Mahaffy hunted down the Daley gang. Mr. Johnny gave a brief but earnest talk in support of home missions among his people back in North Carolina, and business men present collected several hundred dollars to further his work.

High Sheriff Floyd put his feet on the recorder's desk and gazed at the ceiling. "I wouldn't believe it if I hadn't seen it right here in the paper. Le' me tell you we oughtn't to let them Western fellers get ahead of us. If the silver cornet band hadn't disbanded we'd have it down to the depot when old Jim and his Injun get home."

"Let's get the band together again," said the recorder.

Three Shots at Kelsey

By William Corson

RYAN HAD NO TROUBLE following the man ahead as long as his trail led straight down the floor of the valley. The prints showed clearly in the loose gravelly soil and stretches of snow or grass. The spread between steps, and the way the weight dug in at the heels showed that Kelsey was traveling fast, making no effort to hide his tracks any more.

In a way, it didn't make sense. Kelsey was no fool, and must know that even without his injured leg he couldn't match Ryan's long strides on a straightaway chase. Maybe Kelsey was getting panicky. Or maybe he just figured it was a waste of time to try to lose a good tracker on this soft ground, and was hoping to reach firmer going before he was caught.

There was no break in Ryan's steady jogging as he thought it over. Occasionally he shifted the heavy rifle from one hand to the other, and worked the fingers of the free hand vigorously until they warmed up.

Ryan covered ground smoothly, glancing up at intervals to flick his eyes impatiently over the brush-dotted curve of the valley ahead. Having Kelsey unarmed made it nice; very little caution was necessary. The only chance that Kelsey had left was to try an ambush—a sudden jump from behind a bush with a rock or club, too close and quick for Ryan to swing the rifle. Ryan half hoped Kelsey would make the attempt, and then he could get his muscle-knobbed hands on the smaller man . . .

Still, a hand-to-hand battle had faint possibilities of bad luck and risk, and the joy of breaking the shifty Kelsey to a groaning red pulp wasn't worth the risk. Wasn't worth *any* risk, because the game was for keeps and it was all in Ryan's hand if he played it smart. The trump

ace was the big rifle, a telescope-sighted .300 Magnum that could reach out and smash down like a thunderbolt on a deer at ranges well over a quarter-mile. Or on a man, or a horse . . .

Ryan thought about the funny way luck sort of evened up. It had been plain bad luck that he brained Kelsey's horse but missed the man with that first long shot back on the mountain. It was bad luck that Kelsey had rolled down the slope into cover of the brush before he could get in another shot. But it was honey-sweet luck that Kelsey's rifle was still in its saddle boot under the horse, and that Kelsey's pistol had flopped out of its holster in his fall.

But there was no sense in spurring luck too hard, so Ryan played it smart. Smart and safe. When the scuffed dirt led through a small clump of scrub tamarack, Ryan swung wide and cut back to the trail on the other side of the clump. He prodded careful eyes into the mesquite brush that this detour brought near, because Kelsey might anticipate his caution and deliberately go through the pines, then zigzag to lay his ambush in the mesquite. Kelsey was just that kind of a fox-brain, vicious as a side-winder, Ryan told himself.

It was the same way with all sizable rocks. They had to be circled, because Kelsey might be standing just around the side, a jagged splinter of granite in his skinny hand, and ready for a hopeless fight—a stubborn damn fool who was as good as dead and didn't have sense enough to lay down! He was close ahead, too, Ryan decided after slowing momentarily for an intent look at the ground. Crushed blades of wiry grama grass in the footprints were still slowly straightening themselves.

The probability that Kelsey's lead was less than a half-mile began to have special meaning to Ryan when he saw that the valley had quit curving and now swept directly forward for some distance. A straight valley meant a straight line of fire—a chance for the big Winchester to do its stuff. Ahead, and perhaps 200 yards off the line of travel, Ryan spotted a jumbled mound of huge boulders. The top of the pile was a good 40 feet high. Climbing the

heap would take precious seconds at a time when he was gaining fast on Kelsey, but it might give him the chance to end the whole thing with one beautiful, precisely placed bullet. A long-pointed bullet that would snake out and nail Kelsey to the ground, beyond any chance of escape. The rifle was designed for just that kind of long-range specialized job. . . .

Ryan climbed the rock pile. The top boulder was wide as a table and nearly flat. The view was fine, and there was a drift to the thin icy air that chilled and dried the sweat on his face almost immediately. He sat down cross-legged on the weathered surface, snugged the butt of the gun against his shoulder, and rested his elbows on his raised knees. Then he looked through the telescope sight.

The big six-power scope brought distant bushes and rocks into sharp focus, though the image jumped around at first from the pounding of his heart. As he steadied, he tried to follow the line of Kelsey's tracks, but soon lost them in the gray light. He turned the scope down the valley to where it curved abruptly left again, a mile away, then began to back-track methodically, swinging from side to side as he worked nearer. After a while, his eye caught a brief flicker of movement diagonally down and across the valley, far over toward the left-hand wall, just as he was turning the glass away from that area. He jerked the scope back instantly, but could find nothing moving.

It could have been a jack rabbit or coyote, Ryan reasoned, but he continued his intent search. Then suddenly he saw Kelsey. He was standing on a trunk-sized boulder and staring back up the canyon. His brown shirt and dark-gray jacket blended perfectly into the sage and mesquite beyond him, and his face was shadowed by the battered old campaign hat. As Ryan watched, Kelsey raised a hand to his face and made wiping motions.

Exhaling hard, Ryan consciously relaxed his muscles and thumbed over the rifle's safety lever. A hard grin was frozen on the corners of his mouth, and his nostrils flared white. He wondered fleetingly why the other man had

gone from the center of the valley to the far wall—perhaps he'd tried some more track-hiding tricks and was through with straightaway running. It didn't matter.

Ryan raised his head quickly to look over the scope for a naked-eye estimate of the distance. It was a long way, and hard to fix very exactly. At least 600 yards, maybe 650.

He looked through the scope again, and swore angrily as he realized that the sitting-position was not going to be nearly steady enough at that range. The cross-hairs in the center of the image danced all around his target and defied his efforts to bring them to rest where he wanted them. He lurched to his knees and threw himself forward, flat on his belly, then brought the rifle to bear again, his left hand cushioning the wooden stock over the edge of the rock.

Kelsey had moved a step; he was glancing around and buttoning his jacket. Ryan raised the intersection of the cross-hairs to a point about three feet over the other man's head and hurried his trigger squeeze, remembering as he did so to let the vertical cross-hair slide over to the right edge of his target to compensate for the slight wind drift. His pulses were still hammering, and the cross-hair slid minutely too far. Before he could correct the error, the gun bellowed and smashed heavily against his shoulder in recoil.

Ryan swore furiously, knowing he had missed, and jerked the bolt handle to slam a fresh cartridge into the chamber. When he found Kelsey in the scope again, the other man was crouched at the edge of his boulder, white face looking directly toward Ryan's position. Before the cross-hairs steadied again, Kelsey jumped into the brush and disappeared.

The scope held steady for a moment longer, but Ryan caught only a couple of split-second glimpses of Kelsey, bending low and running as fast as his game leg would carry him. There was no chance to get in another shot. Wordless anger rumbled in the back of Ryan's throat as he flipped over the safety lever on the rifle and sat up.

Kelsey's trail was easy to pick up again over by the far hillside. It led straight on, as though its maker were once more depending on speed rather than deception.

Ryan pounded along at a fast lope, his eyes wary. There seemed to be no sound in the world except the gravelly scuff of his low boots and the occasional slapping of brush against his legs. The cold air tasted good in his half-open mouth. He was still running on his toes, with plenty of reserve, and he saw with grim elation how heavy and full Kelsey's prints were, showing the whole foot. There was no spring left in Kelsey's legs. Without breaking stride, Ryan leaned to skim up a handful of snow, stuffed it into his mouth. He felt so good that a little of the feeling of terrible urgency left him.

The valley was growing steadily wider, and a frown began to claw into Ryan's forehead as he ran across stretches of bare rock. At first, it was easy to pick up Kelsey's trail at the other ends of these stony areas, but they became longer and more frequent. The valley had opened to a mile-wide flat when the tracks finally came to an end on a rocky shelf that wandered clear across the valley, from side to side. Ryan panted out onto the ledge and stopped there, wiping his face and glaring around, all complacency drained out of him. The burning urgency of finding and killing Kelsey *quickly* came flooding back, and he groaned in exasperated indecision.

Beyond the shelf was a vast snow-sprinkled meadow that offered no cover. Ryan was positive that Kelsey had not had time to get across the meadow and out of sight, but he lifted the rifle and scanned the far side through the scope. Then he swung back to look over the hills on either side. No sign of Kelsey.

Ryan drew a deep breath and pictured Kelsey's narrow, clever face in his mind. How would that shifty devil have figured it?

Both of them knew the whole area well. Beyond the craggy hill-wall on the right was the open desert, where Kelsey surely wouldn't go—there was almost no cover and no slightest hope of escape from Ryan's superior speed

and the great range of the rifle. Common sense suggested that Kelsey would run for the easier slope of the hillside at the left, which would get him back up into fair cover in wild mountain country. So the left was the obvious smart choice.

That was the tip-off. Ryan ran thought-slitted eyes along the ledge to the left and then turned and sprinted to the right. Kelsey would figure how it would look to a pursuer and then do the opposite—always! He'd sneak and chisel for a half hour here and 15 minutes there, hoping for the darkness that might save him.

Ryan grinned tightly a minute later when he came to a place on the ledge where running water had left a thin film of sand. Kelsey was not going to gain his half hour. Out in the middle of the widest streak of sand—too wide to be jumped—there was a tiny disturbance where a careful foot had not been quite careful enough.

A little farther on, the ledge began to break up, and Kelsey's tracks showed clearly in the softer soil. Ryan's lips skinned back in a happy snarl. It looked for sure like that damned crazy Kelsey was heading for the place where that little canyon cut through the valley wall to the desert! No brush in that canyon, and as soon as they hit the straighter sections, it would be like having Kelsey in a shooting-gallery with no side openings. Smash his legs first, and take plenty of time walking up to him, letting him sweat and beg. . . .

The canyon mouth was less than 400 yards away when he spotted Kelsey just scuttling into it, out of the protection of the last mesquite. He was running heavily, half staggering, and throwing glances back over his shoulder. Ryan decided against a long-odds standing-shot, and Kelsey lurched on out of sight.

Ryan slowed and trotted more easily to let his pumping heart and lungs settle down for the shooting to come. Even at this speed he knew he was making better time than the shambling Kelsey. As he approached the mouth of the cut, Ryan looked over the red-streaked walls and abruptly dropped his pace to a walk, scowling up at the

crest. Flaring through his mind was a sudden great idea, a chance for a quick and hugely satisfying pay-off on his knowledge of the ground ahead.

The little canyon did not cut directly through. It sliced in on an angle to the right for a considerable distance, then turned a sharp V and came back to the left before it headed out to the desert. The crest Ryan was looking at was a sort of wedge between the two long legs of the V. From the top, he would be able to look down into both stretches of the canyon. With just a little hurry, he could get to the top by the time Kelsey turned the point of the V and started coming down the canyon on the far side. Easy range for the powerful weapon in his hand. Ryan licked his lips eagerly, remembering the way the other side of the ridge sloped down to the canyon floor, without any overhangs for Kelsey to huddle under when the slugs began to tear his feet off.

Ryan hastily slid the carrying-sling of the rifle over his head and down across his chest, so that the gun hung diagonally at his back. Close at hand, the 80-foot wall was almost sheer, but a little farther up the canyon the going was easier. He spotted one yard-wide crevice that sliced a jagged path clear to the top; it looked as good as any of half a dozen others he could see farther along the wall, up toward the first bend.

Ryan found plenty of small irregularities for his hands and boots in the first 50 feet of the climb, and he went fast, enjoying the powerful thrusting and sureness of his big muscles. Then the sides of the chimney became smoother and shallower and he had to slow down, cursing savagely at the delay. It was still easy enough going for a good climber, but it required care; after one look at the sharp rocks far below, he went still slower. He was bracing himself for a long stretch within ten feet of the top when he heard the harsh panting above him and looked up.

Kelsey was standing there, watching him. The little man's spectacles were sky-reflecting circles of blank gray in a gaunt face. His jacket was unbuttoned, and the silver

star on the flap of his shirt pocket glinted dully.

Ryan let out his breath in a long groan and leaned his face against the cold rock, careless of the hat that was pushed off and went scaling slowly down.

Kelsey said, "Hello, Mike. Caught you again." His voice was flat and casual.

Ryan did not move, and the man with the star went on talking:

"Always told you you hadn't the brains for a fine gun. You never in the world would of come up here except that you had that gun, would you, Mike?"

Ryan still didn't answer, and Kelsey chuckled dryly. "No, if you hadn't any gun at all, you'd of run me down and wrung my neck inside another mile, sure fire! But you got hypnotized with the notion of throwing slugs around. Turned out the rifle was quite a handicap, didn't it, Mike?" Ryan rolled his forehead against the rock, silent.

"Nothing to say, Mike? You see, I framed you—when I found out you'd climb hills and lose time to get a pot-shot at me, I figured where to show a profit on that craving of yours." He chuckled again. "You fell for it, too."

Ryan suddenly threw back his head and glared at the man above him. "You skinny damned buzzard," he said in a strangled voice, "get through with your blowing and pick your meat!"

Kelsey stuck his hands in his pockets. "No hurry now. Like I was saying, I had to lead you on just fast enough to work the timing and still not give you a chance to blow a hole in my spine—"

"Listen a minute," Ryan interrupted. "I got an idea!"

Kelsey paid no attention. "And since you know this section as well as I do," he went on, "I was sure you'd figure that getting up here was too good to miss. Just like your private slaughterhouse." He paused and kicked at a head-sized boulder, rolling it nearer the top of the crevice.

Ryan heard the sound. He let go with one strained hand and jammed frantic fingers into a lower crack. "Al!" he said hoarsely, "Al, if I drop the rifle and bust it, will

you let me climb down? You can get away easy—I swear to God I'll call it off!"

"Why, I'm not going to drop a rock on you, Mike," Kelsey said mildly. "Not if you behave, anyway. I'm going to take you back and turn you in again, like I set out to do."

He knelt down and reached a hand toward the man in the crevice. "Hand up the rifle, and then you can come up, Mike."

Ryan's narrowed eyes met his for a long moment. Then Ryan wedged a knee into a shallow cleft and freed his right hand to fumble with the sling-strap buckle at his chest.

"That's it, Mike," Kelsey said, watching him steadily. "And don't talk silly; I know you too well. If I let you bust the gun and climb down free, you'd be tearing out my guts with your bare hands inside an hour. Just hand it up here, son, and we'll get on fine."

While Kelsey talked, Ryan undid the strap and leaned to let the rifle swing off his back. He held it pinned with his shoulder against the wall until he could work his hand down to the pistol-grip and get a good hold. Then he took his weight off the gun and lifted it, barrel end up, toward Kelsey's stretching arm.

"That's the style, Mike," Kelsey said. "But just take your finger out of that trigger-guard before—" He broke off and hurled himself sideways just as Ryan got the safety thumbed over and yanked the trigger.

Deafened and jarred by the terrific muzzle blast so close to his head, Kelsey saw the recoiling rifle wrench Ryan's hand back and tear loose from his fingers. It fell glancingly against the clinging man's shoulder, and then went plunging on down toward the rocks below. Kelsey's ears were ringing so that he hardly heard the final smash.

After teetering wildly for a moment, Ryan regained his balance. The men stared at each other, and silence grew in the canyon. Then Ryan laughed harshly.

"You can't blame a man for trying!"

Kelsey got to his feet. "You're a fool, Mike," he said slowly. "I don't think you understand it, yet, that now I

don't have any way to protect myself if I let you get out of that crack alive."

Then Ryan did understand, suddenly, and he quit grinning. "Hey—now wait! Al, that'd be murder, and you're a law officer!"

"It's self-protection," Kelsey said soberly. "I haven't figured a crook's life was worth more than mine since I got over being a young pup full of legal ideas." He started to turn away, then leaned back to ask, "How about it, son, you want to jump, or—or wait for it?"

"You're bluffing, damn you!" Ryan yelled. "You can't do it and I know you can't! I'm coming on up there—" He stabbed frantic fingers toward a handhold above his head.

"That's fine, son," Kelsey said approvingly. "It's good for you to believe that; it makes it easier that way." He stepped back and braced his foot against the side of the head-sized boulder.

Blue Blazes

By George Pattullo

HIS FATHER always had all he wanted to eat and weighed 2,000 pounds with his shoes on. His mother never wore a shoe in her life, had to rustle hard for a living, and weighed barely 750. There are great possibilities in such a union and the colt fulfilled them. From the Percheron stallion he inherited fine bone and magnificent shoulders, and when the sunlight played on his black hide it brought out the identical blue sheen that made his sire glorious. From that he got half his name—Blue. His mother was to blame for Blazes, because from her he inherited his disposition.

His mother was a small, scrawny mare of the old Spanish strain, with slender legs and a coat like a brindle pup's. She was so wild that the sight of a fence made her snort, and had anybody shoved a mess of oats under her nose the mare wouldn't have known its use. She was so mean that the boys called her Violet. Violet could whip any mare on the ranch and once she tore a chunk out of the stallion's shoulder that scarred him for life. With the other brood mares she roamed a 200,000-acre tract we called the Moon Pasture, which took in a valley and a range of hills.

"She ain't got one kind thought," Uncle Harve said.

"And that rascal with her is just as mean," Rush Ardrey declared. "Look at him hightail it, will you?"

At that moment Blue Blazes took a kick at a playmate's ribs, then dashed madly away, shaking his head and flagging his tail in sheer joy of living.

He was certainly mean enough when it came to branding him. In this job it is possible for two men to hold a young colt with ease—one sits on the head while the other gets back of the colt and draws the tail up be-

tween the hind legs and hangs on like grim death. Uncle Harve roped Blue Blazes and it was just my luck to get the tail. As soon as Rush knelt on his head I grabbed the tail and the youngster gave a heave with the strength of a yearling bull, shook Rush off and then kicked me in the stomach, shins, and thigh before I could move. Then he lunged away and raced around the corral to join the mares huddled in a corner. Before he could reach them the buster flipped a rope and noosed his forefeet.

"You will, huh?"

When Blue Blazes bucked, Sloan gave a jerk that flopped him in the dirt. Two cowboys pounced on him and secured the lashing heels and another burned in the company's brand with a red-hot iron that sent up stinging puffs of smoke. Then they emasculated him. While the colt still quivered from it, the buster knelt with knees on his head.

"Take the rope off," he said. "I got him."

Feeling his legs free, Blue Blazes began to struggle. A sharp pain shot through one eye and he writhed in agony. A voice cried angrily from the corral fence: "That'll do, Cal. Quit gougin' that colt."

"He done tried to bite me."

"Shucks, a li'l ol' colt like him! Take your thumb out'n his eye and turn him loose," the boss ordered. "The Turkey Track don't want any blind stuff."

The buster obeyed, giving the colt a vicious parting kick. And Blue Blazes fled to his mother, to whose side he clung for the balance of the day. That night they were turned out and with the Turkey Track red and raw on his left hip, he went back to the range.

There he had nothing to do except eat and grow and romp with the other colts. At eating and growing he was in a class by himself, but his temper was too uncertain to make him a safe playmate. When he was a year old he could clean up any two of the other yearlings and he let slip no opportunity to prove it.

Frequently we glimpsed the mares as we rode range. Invariably Blue Blazes had stationed himself in front like

a stallion leader, nose up to sniff the air, muscles taut to flee. Did a rider approach nearer than 400 yards the colt would blare a warning and the entire band would stampede to the hills.

"Look at him leg it," Rush whooped. "In three years there won't be another hoss like him in the cow country."

The buster said, "If only he don't grow too big. I'd sure like to top him when he's growed."

He got his wish when Blue Blazes neared four years. In the fall the boss saw a chance to turn a few thousand dollars by selling his surplus horses to the war buyers and ordered Sloan to break all the broncos three years old and over to take the place of the culls.

There were 30 such and Blue Blazes was easily the pick of the lot—a big four-year-old of perfect conformation, beautifully muscled, and wild as the antelope that roved the valley. He was first to sight us when we rode to drive them in and he led the band in flight toward the fastnesses of the Mules. Rush and another cowboy headed them off and they swept in a wide semi-circle that carried the chase north of headquarters.

"They'll have to fetch up at the fence there," the boss said, "and then swing round by Saucedá. We've got 'em. Close in. Watch they don't break through but be sure not to crowd 'em too close."

When our maneuvering pressed the broncos toward the open gate of the corral Blue Blazes stopped and faced about. He seemed undecided, looking from us to the stockaded enclosure.

Lyford said, "Go easy or he'll bust through and we'll have it all to do over again."

Somebody drove out the saddle bunch and the broncos mingled with them, whinnying greetings. The trained horses trooped into the corral and the others followed fearfully—all except Blue Blazes. At the gate he whirled out of the press and made a dash for liberty. A rope whined.

"Good throw, Sloan," the boss shouted.

The buster raced his horse some distance alongside Blue

Blazes lest too sudden a jerk break his neck, then swerved to halt him. The pressure on his windpipe maddened the black. He plunged and kicked and bawled, but the noose shut off his breath and he desisted, facing his captor with legs a-sprawl. His nostrils flared red, his eyes bulged as though they would pop from their sockets. Instead of easing up, the buster deliberately tightened the noose by a steady pull and Blue Blazes collapsed to his knees.

"Give him slack," the boss ordered. "Do you want to kill that hoss, Sloan?"

"No, but I aim to learn him what this means."

A deep intake of breath, and the black recovered. He lurched to his feet, but he was still shaking and followed meekly enough when Sloan led the way through the gate. Another rider moved behind to encourage him.

Thereupon we perched gleefully atop the corral fence to watch the buster give the first lesson. The first lesson is often a terrible one, and if a horse be well taught he will ever afterward so fear the rope that he will stand tied to a daisy.

The gate of the smaller inner corral was thrown back, we waved our arms and hats, and the black shot through it.

"Gee, I'm glad Mr. Sloan picked him first to ride," Lyford's small son exulted. He was on the post next to mine: the boy was quivering with excitement.

Severity is essential in teaching the lesson of the rope, but it struck me that Sloan was needlessly harsh with Blue Blazes. Time and again he let the bronco run to the end of the rope, only to toss him into the air. Each time the black came down with a thud that jarred him from teeth to tail. Time and again his stout heart nerved him to scramble up and try once more. At every fall Jimmy Lyford howled with delight and stuttered advice.

Then Sloan brought the bronc down with such sickening force that he lay as one dead, whereupon the child's enjoyment cooled. He looked scared, and after Blue Blazes got up and limped a few steps, Jimmy remained silent.

The buster yelled, "Hi, there! Go to it!" and flapped the rope. The black made another lunge, only to be jerked down again.

"Make him quit it, Daddy. Make him quit it," the boy begged.

Lyford ignored him for the moment, but when it became obvious that Sloan was teasing the bronc to further resistance for the sole purpose of punishing him, the boss got down from his perch. "Let me try my hand with him, Cal. It's been such a mighty long time sence I—well, I'd kinda like to see if I still know how."

"Maybe you'd like to ride him, too."

"No-oo, not me. But you go work on the others and leave him rest awhile."

The buster said thickly as he surrendered the rope, "All right. You're the doctor. But when a hoss is mean, it ought to be taken outa him. He ain't hurt. He's only pretendin'."

So ended the day's ordeal for the black. After some desultory trotting around the corral, he was led out and tethered to a log, there to spend the night.

"He's too hard on 'em," Rush Ardrey said at supper. "I've saw Oscar Goodson gentle one so's a baby could tickle his laigs. And Oscar never did touch him with quirt or spur. A hoss ain't just a hoss."

After some thought Uncle Harve remarked, "That's right. No, he ain't. Sometimes he's a mule."

Rush said, "There's hosses and hosses, just the same as they're men and ol' Uncle Harve here."

"What's that you're sayin'?"

"I was sayin' that hosses, taken by and large, are mighty like humans, only more so, and what goes for one don't for another a-tall. Some're as steady and gentle as a second husband and have to be drove all the time just the same way, and then agin others'll look back at you out of the whites of their eyes and be ter'ble mean and ornery."

"All the same," Uncle Harve said, "I'd liefer any day own a mean one than a gentle no-account."

The boss said, "That goes for men, too. There's some

hope for a mean man, because the right sort of handlin' will often straighten him out; but a no-account—hell, he just ain't."

"Well, anyhow"—Rush sopped up the can molasses on his plate with a crust—"I sure want to be there when Sloan tops him."

"Me, too!" Jimmy said.

The Turkey Track outfit was astir for the day's work a full hour before dawn. In sleepy silence they munched steak and cold bread, gulped some biting coffee, rolled cigarettes, and mounted. The mists of early morning hung low as they ambled toward the corrals and there was a tang in the air that nipped to the bone. A herd of steers humbled and tossed near the corrals.

The boss placed his son on the fence and issued his orders: "Rush, you can help Sloan with the broncos. Buf'lo, you get on the squeezer with Tud, and for Gawd's sake act like you're alive. The rest of you boys do the same as you've been doing. Dick'll earmark and John can handle the irons. Fly at it, hombres!"

A portion of the herd of steers was halloed into the crowding-pen where a horseman darted at them with shrill whoops, scaring them into the chute. In the chute they could neither turn around nor stand still: they had to go forward, to be caught by the squeezer, held fast, and branded. Some were old longhorn steers which had escaped branding as calves and had been running wild in the brakes. These the boss was unloading on an absentee retiring partner; several plunged up over the backs of their comrades in front and cleared the eight-foot fence into open range.

"Look out! Go get 'em! Go get 'em!"

Riders scampered in pursuit, ropes singing for the throw. In the crowding-pen was sweating tumult; at the squeezer the irons sizzled and smoked, Buf'lo grunted and swore, dust welled in choking clouds.

The boss bellowed, "Shove 'em up! Hold him, Buf'lo. Bear down on him. Hot iron! Hot iron!"

Meanwhile the buster was making ready for his own

task in the smaller corral. He twisted some strands into a hackamore, tested every part of his saddle, saw to the straps of his spurs.

"All right. Let's go fetch him."

"Which one?"

"Ol' Blue Blazes."

They walked toward the log to which he was tied. The black had lost his barrel-like girth during a night of sweating fear. He was covered with dirt.

"Now, now," Sloan chided gently when Blue Blazes greeted him with a snort. He unfastened the rope and wrapped it around his saddle horn. All his movements were unhurried, sure. "Get in behind him."

There was no need. The bronc had learned the first lesson and trotted ahead of his captor into the corral. There the buster turned him loose and Blue Blazes began to prowl around and around the inclosure, hunting for an outlet. Once he tried to nose under the gate.

Jimmy shrieked, "He's tryin' to crawl out. Look at him sweat, will you?"

In a few minutes Sloan picked up the rope and halted the bronc. The black stood with his feet braced, watching the buster as though fascinated while he advanced along the rope hand over hand. As he came Sloan talked to him, holding the horse's eyes with his own. What he said was good-natured banter, the voice was low and confidential; friendly, also, was the slow, fearless approach. Blue Blazes stood perfectly still. He was quaking. He sensed the mastery under that light touch, the malice back of the caressing voice.

"Fetch the blanket." Holding the hackamore at the jaw, he laid the blanket gently on the bronc's back. Blue Blazes swerved and lashed out with his heels.

Sloan said without anger, "All right, if that's the way you feel about it." He snubbed Blue Blazes tight to a post, dropped a rope back of the left hind leg, and hauled it up so that he could not move. Then he took hold of the blanket again, but the gentleness had flown. He slapped it smartly across the bronco's back from side to side, cry-

ing, "You will, hey? Well, then, pull your fool head off."

Two terrific wrenches convinced Blue Blazes that resistance was hopeless and that the blanket did not hurt. He grew passive and permitted Sloan to lay it in place. That achieved, the buster paused for a puff at a cigarette. At last he walked over to his saddle and lifted it from the ground.

"Ear him down, Rush— Got him? All right. Watch out he don't swing you off'n your feet."

The cowboy brought his weight to bear on the bronc's head while Sloan was easing the saddle to his back. Blue Blazes did not show a sign of fight and waited without a move, but his body stiffened to rigidity and his eyes rolled back at Sloan. Rush knew those symptoms.

"If you want—to send—any word to your kinfolks in Arkinsaw," he panted, "now's—the time—Cal."

The buster made no reply, but reached under the bronc's belly with a pronged stick and caught the girth. Only when he had brought it up into place and was ready to cinch did he offer any comment. Then he said lazily, "I reckon you've got it all framed up for me right now, ain't you, sweetheart?"

The girth tightened and Blue Blazes humped himself and tried to swell his body with intakes of breath so as to loosen it. Sloan tugged and pulled as though he wanted to cut him in two. Then he stepped back.

"Let him go and see what he'll do."

Blue Blazes promptly lay down.

"Goddamn it," the buster said. "That's one thing that makes me mad—just awful mad."

He slashed at the black's head with a quirt. The thong raised a wale but the bronc did not budge. Again Sloan struck, but the black merely blinked. "You won't, hey?" The buster kicked him in the ribs. That also failing of results, Sloan raised his foot and jabbed him in the nose with his spur. Still Blue Blazes would not get up.

Rush said, "Let me try."

"Are you breakin' this hoss, or am I?"

"I only thought—" Rush began and at that moment the

black lurched to his feet.

"And a right good thing you did, too," the buster told him, "else I'd have skinned you alive."

Then Sloan adjusted his spurs, gave a hitch to his belt, and made ready to mount. Jimmy shrilled in genuine solicitude, "Best throw that chaw away, Mister Sloan, or maybe you'll swallow it."

Sloan swung into the saddle. It was done so deftly that the black hardly realized he was there, his attention being focused on the man clinging to his ear. But when Rush let go his hold, Blue Blazes awoke to the fact that a rider was on his back; he felt the cautious pressure of the knee as the buster slid his feet into the stirrups. Even then he did not offer to move—simply tilted the saddle at a more acute angle. Sloan flicked him with the spur. The bronc winced.

"Well," the buster said, "I'm up here."

The black turned his head for a peep. Thinking he meant to bite his leg, Sloan swung the quirt at his muzzle. Instantly Blue Blazes reared straight up and threw himself back.

"Look out!"

The warning was superfluous. As coolly as a man vacating a chair, the buster slid out of the saddle and stepped aside. He did it without the least fluster, but I was close to him when he cleared and I saw a devil leap in his yellow eyes.

Blue Blazes hit the ground with a smack that knocked the wind out of him and he lay there while one could count ten. Then he clambered to his feet, but before he could make another move Sloan was atop him, feet in stirrups and ready.

"Come on!" he mocked. "Try that again, you son-of-a-bitch!"

The black reared again, but the buster fetched him a blow between the ears with the loaded butt of his quirt that brought him down, and while his senses were still reeling, started to ply the whip, first on one side, then on the other. A very little of this sufficed. Blue Blazes broke

into a stiff, jarring trot.

The buster said, "Here he goes! He's coming unwell right now."

Right upon his words, the black leaped. With mouth agape, bawling like an angry calf, he bounded high in air, head sunk low between his knees. In the same instant he hit the ground he whirled and pitched blindly across the corral toward the fence, hind quarters weaving. The buster was raking him with the spurs. There came an instant's loss of poise and Sloan grabbed the horn and righted himself, but for the moment he felt too insecure to use the quirt. Blue Blazes bucked in tremendous jumps all around the corral, his tail clamped like a vise. The jar of his impact was terrific. It sent the buster's head snapping back. Blood began to trickle from his nose. Then he gulped and the bulge disappeared from his cheek.

"He's swallowed it," Jimmy yelled. "He done swallowed his chaw!"

Blue Blazes made a frantic leap and turned back so fast that he barely missed his own behind. Sloan stuck to him. Then abruptly as he had begun, the bronc quit. Sloan seized the opportunity to alter his position and get a firmer grip on the hackamore rope. His face was pallid.

"Now we'll see who's—" he began and choked, because the bronc got into action. With a harsh squawl he pitched straight ahead—straight for the fence.

"Jump! He's going into it!"

Apparently Sloan thought so, too. He kicked one foot free for the dive and it was his undoing. When almost into the fence, the black swerved. His side actually scraped the boards and Sloan's leg was knocked backward. He let out a groan and toppled off into the dust.

Blue Blazes whirled like a snake and jumped for Sloan's middle, striking with his forefeet like a stallion. He missed by a fraction of an inch and the buster squirmed away. Once more the black sprang. Sloan managed to elude him and started toward the fence on hands and knees. Blue Blazes seized the seat of his pants with his teeth and took a piece out of them.

"Hi, you devill!" yelled the boss, who had come on the run at Jimmy's outcry. He hurled a red-hot branding iron at the bronco's head. It caught Blue Blazes on the neck, inflicting a long burn. The black retreated.

Lyford puffed, "I've seen a mule tromp a man, but that's the first time in my life I ever seen a hoss that mean."

Sloan was dusting his shirt and testing his limbs for breakages. Now he said in a low, unnatural voice; "I'm a-goin' to kill him for this."

"No-oo, leave him go, Cal. He'll never make a cow horse now and we'll get shet of him with that army bunch. They don't mind 'em mean."

Now, it is an unwritten law in cowland that no man shall interfere between a rider and his horse. The buster stopped short and stared at the boss.

"Do you mean to say you ain't a-goin' to let me ride him?"

"What's the use? He ain't worth the risk, Cal."

Sloan said, "Then I'm through. You can have my job right now."

"Please yourself. That suits me. Let's go over here and I'll give you your time. You're too rough, Sloan."

"If you want to baby 'em, go git somebody else," the buster said contemptuously as he followed the boss to the gate. There Lyford wrote out a check with the stub of a pencil.

"You can have Snake to get to town," he said. "Leave him in the company corral there. Well, *adios*. Take care of yourself."

The buster said, "Same to you."

He started off without a word of farewell to the boys with whom he had worked for six years. It needed only a spark to explode his rage, so nobody ventured to address him—with the exception of Jimmy. Jimmy could not for the life of him repress a grin when Sloan rode past the post he straddled and he cried to the buster, "Did that chaw make you sick, Sloan?"

"If you was my boy," Sloan said, "I'd sure enough tan you good."

Jimmy stuck out his tongue and shrilled, "But I ain't your boy, and if you ever lay a hand on me, my daddy'll kill you."

Meanwhile Rush Ardrey had engaged the boss in talk. When Jimmy joined them, his father was saying, "Shucks, that hoss wouldn't even leave a grease spot of you. You don't want Blue Blazes."

"Leave me take him and see, Lyford. Don't send him off to the war. I'll pay you sixty dollars for ol' Blue Blazes—ten a month off'n my pay."

The boss said, "You've bought somethin'. But if he busts you wide open, don't come bellyachin' to me."

Rush never gave the black a chance to bust him open. He kept Blue Blazes at headquarters in a pen used in bad seasons for sick cows and for a fortnight doled out only sufficient food and water to sustain life. Having always been a hearty eater, Blue Blazes lost weight with surprising rapidity. When a block of hay was tossed into the pen, he fought shy of it because he had eaten nothing except grass since babyhood. However, hunger conquered; but there was a vast difference between hay and green grass and the block did not fill the void. The black was troubled in mind, too. Rush had left the hackamore on his head, with about ten feet of rope. It worried him.

"Why'nt you take it off?" Jimmy demanded. "His head is all swelled up."

"You run back to the house to your ma. Don't you see I gotta wear him down?"

Gradually Blue Blazes became reconciled to his surroundings and began to show curiosity about the source of his meals. Rush left him severely alone. Never once during the period of diet did he give the black cause for distrust. The result was that one night Blue Blazes came sniffing at the hand that held out the hay to him. Next morning, although he blew like a grampus, he permitted Rush to touch his nose. Blue Blazes seemed to sense friendliness in the fingers and shortly after this relation was established he began to nicker at Rush's approach. Later still he allowed Rush to rub his neck as he nibbled

at the hay.

One of the outfit jeered, "Sure, he'll let you do that now because he's starved and weak. But wait till he's got his stren'th back—he'll throw you into the next county. That hoss is like a mule, I tell you. I knowed a mule once that acted gentle as a lamb till she got this feller where she wanted him—and then I had to break the news to his widder."

Not until the bronc had grown gaunt and listless did Rush take him out of the pen. Then he led him down to a sand flat beside the creek. There he saddled him without assistance and Blue Blazes did not resent it.

"That wind sure cuts like a knife," Rush told himself, trying to think it was the chill that made his teeth chatter.

He stepped cautiously into the saddle; the black remained quiet. He humped his back a little, but the cowboy gave him time to think it over. He clucked at him and talked in a low voice. Soon Blue Blazes ventured a few steps as though to find out what would happen. Nothing happened, so he jerked his head down and pitched about 20 yards. His rider sat undisturbed, employing neither quirt nor spur. The black gave it up, perhaps as a waste of energy. He began to trot. Still nothing hurt him.

An hour later Rush made our eyes pop by riding the dripping bronco up to the door of the bunkhouse.

"He's broke," he said, giving Blue Blazes's neck a friendly slap to prove it. "In a month I'll have me a ropin'-horse. He'll be eatin' out'n my hand."

"Out of your laig, you mean," Uncle Harve said. "He won't stay like that, Rush. One of these days that hoss'll turn right around and bite your ear off."

"Shucks, no. Him and me understand each other."

It did look that way. Although Rush increased the bronc's feed so that Blue Blazes regained his barrel-like body, the black made no serious effort to throw him. Now and again he did a little "gloating," but it was half-hearted and seemed to spring from a conviction that it was expected of him.

Winter set in and he was turned out to pasture. In a

week he had almost forgotten his recent experiences. Then one sparkling morning three horsemen surprised Blue Blazes and some companions in a box canyon and cornered them against a sandstone cliff. While two stood guard, the other stretched a rope barrier.

"Take 'em all except the black."

"But he's the pick of the lot, Cal."

"I know—but we don't want him. I've got a li'l score to settle with that gen'l'man on my own account."

Blue Blazes pricked his ears when he heard Sloan's voice. The buster threw his rope with an overhand flip and cried, "I've got you where I want you now. And there ain't nobody here to play the baby. Me and you can have it out."

They threw Blue Blazes and hog-tied him, and Sloan went to work to get even. His weapon was the stout limb of a mesquite tree and he flailed with it on head and neck and ribs until his arms ached. So savagely did he punish the horse that one of his companions was moved to an oath of protest.

The buster snarled, "You keep out'n this. He's my meat. And I'll kill him—after I've learned him to—"

"Look out! Here comes somebody."

There was a rattle of wheels on the rim of the canyon. With a scared look at his confederates Sloan removed the ropes from the black and ran to his horse. Then they scattered the other captives and galloped off.

Presently the Turkey Track boss and his small son arrived in a buckboard, wending homeward from a trip to a windmill. They passed the mouth of the canyon.

The boy piped up, "What's that, Daddy? Look beyond those trees. Looks like a dead horse, ain't it?"

Lyford peered at the object on the ground and said, "Let's go see." His astonishment knew no bounds when he recognized Blue Blazes. "What the Sam Hill!—I never seen anything like it. Who's been beating you, ol' feller? Hey? Fetch my rope, son."

"Is he dead, Daddy? Is he dead?"

"No-oo, but he's sure tore of a fright. I never saw a

worse beating. Let's see who's been round here."

"Did he have a fight, Daddy?"

The boss scanned the trampled ground and then nodded. "Sure, Jimmy. That must have been it. Ol' Blue Blazes got into a fight with another hoss and the other hoss give him the worst of it. What else could it be? That's what we'll tell Rush, hey, son?"

"Them're right queer marks for a fight with a hoss," said Uncle Harve that night. "Looks to me like—how the tarnation did you manage to bring him in, Lyford?"

"Just eased him along. He come to life right after we found him."

Rush Ardrey was at a division camp 50 miles to the south, riding fence and tending windmills, and did not learn of the occurrence for nearly a month. By that time the black's wounds had healed beyond betrayal. Nevertheless he was suspicious.

"A fight, huh? Hell's bells, there ain't a hoss on the range Blue Blazes can't lick the whey out of."

"Maybe the stallion—"

"How could he get out? Besides, Blue Blazes wouldn't fight him. He's got more sense. That hoss is goin' to be marked for life, Lyford. As soon as he's well enough to move, leave me take him to my camp and grain him the rest of the winter. How about it?"

It was at the division camp high up on the back of the Mules that Rush trained Blue Blazes in the work of a cow horse. The black was quick to learn. Keen and powerful, he early developed into a crack roping-horse and he could outrun anything the cowboy had ever topped. For mountain work an especially sure-footed animal is required and Blue Blazes was like a mule in that respect. He could slide down a shale slope on his rump and bring up in stride, and he could whirl faster than any calf on the Turkey Track.

The winter wore away. The boss said to Uncle Harve, "Those sons-of-bitches're getting bolder every day. That makes twenty-two head since December."

Uncle Harve bit off a hunk of tobacco and tongued it meditatively. "Why'n't you have the varmint arrested?"

You've got proof."

The boss said, "What's the use? You know as well as I do we can't get a jury to convict a man for stealin' hosses or rustlin' cattle in this country. And Sloan—"

"He'll slip up yet. Him and them Hightower boys is drinkin' heavy and it's only a question of time, to my notion."

Lyford said, "Well, if we can't stop it legally, we'll do it our own way. Saddle up and take this over to Sloan's place for me, Uncle Harve. Maybe you'd best make sure he ain't home first, though."

"I ain't scared of Sloan," Uncle Harve protested.

Nevertheless he took pains to ascertain that the buster was in town before starting to deliver the letter. A quarter of a mile north of the ranch house he passed the reservoir Lyford had built to irrigate the farm lands on which he raised his feed. Jimmy was sailing a paper boat in the water running from the sluice.

"Git away from there, cowboy! What the tarnation you doin' out here, anyhow? I swan you make me nervous, always pokin' in that ditch!"

"Where you bound, Uncle Harve? Take me with you."

"No sirree. You git on your pony and go home to your ma this minute. Ain't there no place else to play 'cept a six-foot ditch? And look at your clo's, cowboy—and you most a man growed, too."

"Aw, take me with you, Uncle Harve. I'll be awful good—honest."

Uncle Harve waved his hand and ambled on. Of course he had to pretend that he expected to find Sloan at home when his wife came to the door.

She said, "Cal's went to town—and I don't much care if he never comes back."

"Oh, now, Miz Sloan! Has Cal been mistreatin' of you?"

"Mistreatin'? Huh!" She stopped herself, then asked, "What's that you got there in your hand, Uncle Harve? Anything for us? Some mail?"

Uncle Harve said, "Just a letter for Cal. Want to give it to him?"

"Depends on what's in it." She fingered the envelope doubtfully. "I do hope this won't make no trouble. It ain't a warrant or something, Uncle Harve?"

"No-oo. What I be doin' with a warrant?"

"Well, jest leave it and I'll see he gits it whenever he comes home."

Uncle Harve coughed. "Do you mind mentionin' to Cal, ma'am, how come I brung it over? Just happened to be ridin' this way and Lyford asked me to. I don't know what's in that there letter any more'n you do, Miz Sloan."

"Then it is trouble."

The letter threw Sloan into a terrible rage when he read it next morning. His wife asked no questions but prudently kept out of reach, and after breakfast he saddled a horse and rode off toward the ranch.

At the kitchen door of the manager's house he asked. "Where's Lyford?"

The Chinese cook said, "Him no home. He go light away to town soon as he et."

"Well, I'm here to see him and I'll stick around until he gits back. Will he be home for supper, Chink?"

"I no know. Maybe. Maybe no."

Sloan walked over to the cowboys' quarters. He found nobody there except Miguel, who was making a hair bridle in the saddle shed.

Miguel told him, "All gone. No one here but me and little Missus, and she is sick of the head and sleeps. So I am minding the baby. Hey, Jimmy?"

"I ain't a baby, you big ol' fool, you! I'm five years old and goin' on six." With that, the boy abandoned play in the saddle shed. He was afraid of Sloan, and as soon as he saw Miguel's attention wander he slipped away to the house. There he dug up his toy boat from a heap of play-things and went down to sail it in the big ditch below the reservoir.

Sloan pulled a bottle from his overalls and took a long swig. He offered Miguel a drink, but the Mexican declined. In a few minutes the buster took a second pull.

"It's time Lyford learned this is a free country," he mum-

bled. "Folks is just as good as people, any day."

Miguel paid him no attention. It was very quiet in the saddle shed and not a sound came from the ranch house, where Mrs. Lyford was sleeping off a headache and the Chinaman was peeling potatoes. A couple of hours passed, but still the boss did not return. Sloan kept on taking nips. Now and again he cursed, his gaze on the road winding over the mesa toward town.

"Ain't he ever comin' back?" he asked Miguel. The horse wrangler said he didn't know. "Well, I don't aim to sit here all night. The sorry scoundrell! You tell him, Miguel, that if he thinks I'm stealin' his horses or rustlin' his cattle, why'nt he come out like a man and say so to my face 'stead of sittin' down and writin' a dirty li'l letter? You tell him just that, unnerstan'? We've got courts, ain't we? Well, tell him to prove it on me 'in court. The Turkey Track can afford to hire them a lawyer."

He left Miguel and went to the bunkhouse where he remained about an hour, drinking alone. His wrongs began to boil; the more he brooded over them, the more contemptible and cowardly seemed Lyford's treatment of him.

Glancing up from his work, Miguel saw Sloan riding away and flogging his horse as he went. The Chinese cook was plucking a chicken on the back porch when the buster rocketed past the house, sawing his horse's head from side to side for some fancied fault. The cook paused to watch. Sloan soon got straightened out and slowed to a trot. The Chinaman saw him cross the footbridge over the reservoir ditch, then he lost interest and went on plucking feathers.

The buster came upon Jimmy at play in the muddy water. The boy was prattling to himself, giving orders to the crew of a merchant ship to keep a watch out for submarines. The paper boat stood proudly erect; the ditch's banks being so high and steep that no breeze reached it.

It was on the tip of Sloan's tongue to hail Jimmy and tease him to hear him cuss, but a puff of wind at that moment sent some water lapping over the rim of the res-

ervoir. Sloan looked at the sluice gate and an odd, furtive expression came on his face. He turned in the saddle to stare back at the ranch house, the stables, down the valley, away to the distant hills; he stood up in the stirrups to make sure. Then he moved his horse to higher ground, tied him to a mesquite tree, and walked to the sluice.

Engrossed in naval tactics, Jimmy neither saw nor heard him. Sloan examined the lock a moment, then tugged at the gate's lever. It came readily.

The roaring rush of the flood sobered him. Possibly in that instant he would have turned to rescue the boy had not fear driven him. He ran to his horse and fled.

The animal headed toward home. "Not that way, damn you!" Sloan cried, slewing him around. He struck south toward the Mules. In their canyons he might find a place to hide until a chance offered to slip across the border into Mexico. For four hours he urged his jaded horse up steep slopes, nor would he recognize its condition.

"You're throwing off on me," he railed, striking it over the ears with the quirt. "You ain't give out—you're actin' this way a-purpose."

On a jutting crag he turned to look back. The whole valley was spread out below. Midway between him and the clump of green that marked the ranch house was a swirl of dust. Tiny dots moved under it. "They're after me already."

At nightfall, with the purple shadows creeping up the shaggy sides of the Mules, Sloan clattered down a rocky trail into a canyon. It was very quiet and green and peaceful. There was a log shack at one end amid trees, and to the right of it a pen.

He panted, "Maybe Rush'll lend me a fresh hoss. If he don't—he'll have to, that's all. I'll make him."

He eased his gun in its holster. Then he halloed. There was no response except a neigh, which came from a saddled horse near the shack. With a cry of relief the buster kicked his feet free and sprang down. Here was salvation—hope soared in him. The beast he abandoned wavered a moment and sank to the ground.

The horse beside the shack shied away at Sloan's approach.

"Hold still, you son-of-a-bitch," the buster yelled, frantic at the delay. He managed to grab the loose reins, but the brute dodged and pulled. Sloan cursed again and jumped to seize the cheek of the bridle. The answering tug jerked him off his feet and he fell flat in the dirt.

A blaring screech and a great black shape rose above him and smashed down, striking with iron-shod hoofs. Sloan tried to roll clear. The horse landed in the middle of his back. He reared and struck again.

"Hi! Hi!" Rush came stumbling out of a clump of post oaks back of the shack with an ax in his hands. "You, Blue Blazes! You! Quit it!" With ax and voice he forced the maddened horse off and dragged Sloan into the shack.

Shortly Lyford arrived at the head of five men, their mounts in a lather. "Has Sloan passed this—" he began, and caught sight of the stricken brute on the ground.

Then Rush led them into the shack, where they stood silently above the broken thing in his bunk. Not a word did the boss say. At last he turned away and went outside and they heard him ascending the trail.

Uncle Harve said, "Well, it wasn't Sloan's fault that Jimmy ain't dead, so I reckon Blue Blazes done saved us a job. But who's goin' to bury this bastard?"

The Constable of Lone Sioux

By William Byron Mowery

BETWEEN STROKES of the currycomb and brush, Constable Prawl was outlining the day's work to his sorrel mare as she cropped the dew-wet grass behind the lonesome cabin on Lone Sioux Run.

"We'll mosey down toward the Border today, Molly m'lady, and take a look-see through Dry Bottoms. Last time I heard from Red Haley, Red said there's a two-man whisky outfit som'eres down that way. These Yankee Sioux are bad enough eggs when they're sober; if they ever get a supply of blaze-belly, they'll stage a Little Big Horn with us Mounted and there won't be enough left of the Force, out here on these plains, to use for seed!"

The morning sun was just gilding the tops of the tall whitewoods that sheltered the outpost cabin of the Mounted Police, and a gray smoke was curling up from the waters of the small creek. In a dead elm a magpie, a whisky-jack, and a red squirrel were quarreling over a vine of wild blue grapes, and upstream a grouse boomed its hollow wilderness note.

Six miles westward a range of timbered, pathless hills lifted up out of the prairie, but to north, east, and south the rolling plains stretched away almost unbroken. Swept by winter blizzards and browned by the long summer sun, the country was a wild lonely land, unsettled, unclaimed, but fought over fiercely by bands of roving Assiniboines, Sioux, and Chippewas, who hunted the small herds of buffalo that strayed up from the Montana badlands.

Five years before, the cabin in the whitewood drogue had been a rendezvous for a whisky-trading outfit, but at the coming of Colonel MacLeod's troop of Yellow-Stripes the traders had slunk back across the Border. Then the cabin had been made a patrol outpost of the

Mounted Police, where they could watch the Indian bands and also keep liaison with the U.S. Cavalry company stationed across the Line.

With its long patrols, its loneliness and dangers, the one-man post was a bugbear, and assignment there was a form of disciplinary punishment. To the men of Inspector Milton's detachment the place had become known as "Deserter's Delight" and "The Hop-Off." Whenever a Mounted constable or non-com became disgruntled and clashed with an officer or could not stand up to the raw hard life, he was detailed to Lone Sioux Run, where it was expected of him to step quietly across the Border and drop into the limbo of forgotten men.

That was the reason why Constable Bingham Prawl, almost a year ago, had been exiled from the main Police post, 60 miles northwest, and detailed to the Lone Sioux cabin. Big, rawboned, and restless, Prawl had his strong points but he was hot-tempered and blunt, and his officers considered him too insubordinate to waste time on.

Finished with the currycombing, Prawl went into the cabin for his saddle, guns, and pack. As he was buckling the bellyband on the mare, he stopped suddenly, listening. From faraway south the crisp morning air brought him the faint popping of a rifle.

The shots were patterned: two shots, and an interval; then one shot and a longer interval; then two more.

"That's for us, Molly m'lady," Prawl grunted. "Wants us to wait for him. Whoever it is, he seems to know that we ride off about this time. Wonder who it can be and what's on his mind."

He finished saddling up, lighted his cob pipe, and waited, while the mare fell to grazing again. A few minutes later Prawl happened to look westward and saw a thin column of smoke spiraling up from the brow of the nearest hill, six miles away. Presently the spiral broke into abrupt puffs which were tossed out to right and left of the perpendicular column.

Prawl reached for his Service glasses and studied the smoke. A puzzled look spread over his rocky, weathered

face.

"Another signal for us, Molly! And if I know smoke talk, it's another message for us to wait. Two visitors all at once—wouldn't that singe your whiskers? Here we go for weeks not seeing anybody and so lonesome that a fellow almost starts shaking hands with the willows, and then all at the same time two mother's sons come bobbing up out of the prairie!"

The smoke signal tailed off. Silence brooded over the little valley of Lone Sioux and the dun country around it.

As Prawl focused his glasses on the hills and watched, he was startled by an unexpected shout just to the south of the cabin. Instinctively he whirled around and reached for his Snider carbine, but then he dropped the weapon to his foot and waited.

A *shaganappi* cayuse and rider broke through the willow thicket, splashed recklessly across the creek, and galloped up to him. A Crow Indian, hardly more than 18 years old and slender as a reed, leaped off the pony with a terse "*Wock!*" of greeting.

Prawl nodded. "How're you, Jumping Deer? You sure-lee got here fast since your signal shots. On a short bust that pony of yours can run like an antelope. How's everything south of the Border?"

The young Indian shrugged. "Plenty peace talk but no peace. Plenty trouble with Sioux all time." He motioned west toward the hills, where stray wisps of the smoke signal still lingered. "Who make that smoke talk, huh?"

"Un't know," Prawl said. "Except it's somebody on the way here." He looked at the young Crow inquiringly. "What brought you up here through those Sioux hunting-parties? Did Corporal Red Haley send you?"

Jumping Deer nodded, reached down, and pulled a dirty paper from his legging. Prawl smoothed the creases out of the page and saw that it was a lengthy, penciled message to him, on a requisition sheet of the U.S. Cavalry. Dated 36 hours previously, at field headquarters across the Border, it was from Trooper Red Haley, with

whom he had ridden many a long patrol along the Line.

He held the paper to the morning sun and read:

Dear Bing:

I got your message about looking out for those Stonies with the stolen cayuses, but I haven't seen hide nor hair of 'em so far. I'd guess that by now they've either et the cayuses or traded 'em to the Sioux, but I'll keep on looking.

But what I'm writing you about, Bing, is these Sioux. I'm getting good and damned tired at the way they're being babied and mollycoddled along. Just about every day some new General or some new Silk-Hat from Washington comes here to powwow with 'em and say: 'Please, Mister Laughing Grizzly, stop killing people and setting the ranges on fire. Please be a good boy and quit toma-hawking the Crows and Blackfeet and Chippewas.' They're actually going to send a delegation up there to ask Sitting Bull to come back across the Border where he belongs. And him wearing Custer's ring!

But Sitting Bull is never going to come back unless something drastick is done. He'll sit right where he is till the cows come home, causing you people trouble and grief just like he done down here. Your Big Augers have been babying him the same as mine, and I'll bet my watch against your shirt-button that you're as tired of it as I am.

After all these Generals and Big Noises have failed, wouldn't it be funny, Bing, if a buck cop like you and a two-striper like me would up and tie a can to Sitting Bull's tail that'd bring him to taw quick. Well, I've got an idea. And it's a good one. I've thought it all through and I believe the two of us can ram it home.

The only thing is, it's a plumb dangerous trick, Bing. Dangerous like a barrel of sidewinders. If the Sioux ever catch on to our game, our carcasses won't be worth hauling home for tallow—

A yell from the direction of the hills broke into Prawl's reading. He shot once with his revolver to let the man know he was waiting, and then read the rest of Corporal Haley's letter.

It sketched the plan in considerable detail, along with a carefully marked chart of the hills and creeks down toward the Border, and closed with a second warning of what would happen to one Canadian Mounted Policeman and one U.S. Cavalry corporal if the Sioux ever caught them or even got suspicious of them.

Prawl read the letter again, slowly this time. For a minute or two he stood there wide-legged, thinking hard. He realized, as Haley did, that the two of them would be taking their lives in their hands, and he was not at all sure that the scheme would have substantial results, even if they carried it out successfully and escaped the Sioux afterward.

But still the plan looked good to him. If it worked as well as Haley expected, it would undermine Sitting Bull's power and hand the leadership over to those Sioux chiefs who wanted to end the bloodshed that had been sweeping the Plains so long.

Slowly Prawl's face hardened and his big fist clenched. "By the Lord," he swore silently, "I'll try it. If I lose, if the Sioux catch me—well, I won't have to be a damn deserter."

Half a mile west of the creek, a second Indian, the party who had made the smoke signal, rode over a swell and waved his arms. As the man came closer Prawl recognized him as Many Eagles, a roving Chippewa sub-chief who had a band of ten lodges.

Many Eagles and his 14 bucks were in bad odor with the Mounted. They were suspected of stealing horses, killing cattle, and starting prairie fires to drive game. Nothing had been proved against them, however. While Prawl did not particularly care for this Chippewa band, he disliked to see them accused of crimes that other Smokies committed.

The sub-chief was in a high pitch of excitement as he yanked his pony up short from a dead run and tumbled off face to face with the Policeman. In broken English, sign talk, and a torrent of Chippewa, he poured out an alarming story.

The main facts, as Prawl gathered them, were that

Many Eagles and his ten families had been camped at a little lake 20 miles southwest; that Sitting Bull and a large band of Sioux had appeared, captured the Chippewas, were holding them prisoners, maltreating them and threatening them with death. The sub-chief had managed to escape during the night and come for help.

Prawl swore a hard oath at the news. Inasmuch as Sitting Bull's band had killed seven Chippewas under similar circumstances just a couple of months ago, the Sioux chief would probably carry out his threats.

Absently patting the mare, Prawl tried to think. Sergeant Dave Larett and eight men were stationed 37 miles northwest and Inspector Milton's post was 20 miles farther on. To get word to either detachment would take an entire day, and for them to send a detail to the Sioux would take another day or more. In all probability they would reach the Sioux camp too late to save the Chippewas.

"I guess it's up to me," he decided, profoundly moved by Many Eagles's anxiety for his little band. "Though what one man can do there—you probably can stick it in your eye. Afterward, if I get away from there alive, I'll go on and start work on this idea of Haley's."

He took out the letter again, read it a third time, and studied the map till a clear picture of it was fixed in his memory. Then he tore the message to small pieces and gave them a fling.

"Jumping Deer," he bade the young Crow, "after you get yourself a good meal in my cabin and rest your pony, go back and tell Corporal Haley that I'm throwing in with him on that plan. Tell him I'll start my part of it to working either late this evening or tomorrow morning. About yourself—on this ride back, you'd better swing 'way east so's you won't run into any of these game-scouting parties that the Sioux have got out. The Sioux are trying to hog the buffalo in this country and they're shooting everyone on two laigs that they meet up with."

He turned to Many Eagles. "All right. You and I'll high-tail it for the main Sioux camp—"

He broke off, listening again. From the rolling prairie to the northwest came the patterned shots of a rifle, signaling him to wait.

"I'll be double-damned!" he grunted. "Still another mother's son wanting to see me! You two go inside and eat while I find out who this is and what he wants."

A few minutes later a horseman rode out of a patch of timber up Lone Sioux and cantered leisurely toward the cabin. Prawl recognized him as a half-breed scout named Colquhuon, who was attached to Inspector Milton's post.

"What is it this time, Colquhuon—an order or a bawling out?" Prawl asked, as the half-breed dismounted. "Or did the O-C send you down to see if I'd deserted yet?"

The half-breed handed him an envelope. Prawl tore it open. As he scanned the note from Inspector Milton, his eyes hardened and anger burned in him. The note was *both* order and reprimand—a curt order and a plain hint that he had been lax in his patrolling. The message read: *Several more head of stock are reported killed by the Indians at Three Leavings. These were valuable government cattle given to the half-breeds there. I have evidence that the killing was done by Chippewas, in all likelihood by Many Eagles's band. This occurred in your territory. I must ask you to drop any other affairs you may be engaged on and clear this up at once. I expect an immediate report from you.*

In a blaze of anger Prawl looked up at the half-breed. "Go back and tell that fancy Dan, that I said he can go to hell! Tell him that a Sioux scouting-party killed them cattle. Tell him—"

Colquhuon interrupted: "I tell de O-C nutting, *m'sieu* Constable. You write eet down an' I take eet to heem, *ou'*; but tell heem, *non!*"

"All right, then!" Prawl snapped. He tore a sheet from his patrol book, fished a pencil stub from his pocket, and printed a reply to Inspector Milton:

I've got no time just now to go riding patrol on some dead bossies. Your evidence against the Chippewas isn't worth a bodewash chip anyhow. If I'm not patrolling this

territory to suit you, you know what you can do about it.

As he signed the defiant note and thrust it at the half-breed, he fully realized that this was at long last the end of the Mounted trail for him. He was not only disobeying a plain order but telling his O-C to go jump. The consequences would be swift and certain. Inspector Milton would order him back to detachment headquarters, on charges. And that meant the sorrowful ride across the Border and fading out of the Force.

Colquhuon spoke up: "When I pass Sergeant Larett's post, he read dat letter from de O-C, and den he write you on de back. *Voilà.*"

Prawl turned the paper over and read Sergeant Larett's hastily scribbled note:

The O-C is on a mean prod about those cattle, Bing, so don't think anything about his being sort of sharp with you. If you need any help down there, just holler and I'll try to spare you a constable a few days. Or come myself. Take care of yourself.

The warmth and friendliness of Dave Larett's note gave Prawl a bad moment. Larett, his true friend, had had faith in him all along. Larett had remarked a score of times: "Bing Prawl is no deserter, you'll see. He'll stick there on Lone Sioux till hell freezes." Now he was letting Dave Larett down; big-hearted, understanding Dave, who had stuck up for him, believed in him, and helped him all that a man could there on isolated Lone Sioux.

But then he thought of Inspector Milton's constant reprimands and humiliations. Of the time he had lost two Police horses in a soup-thin muskeg because he'd been boxed by a prairie fire and tried the muskeg as a last resort, and how the inspector had fined him six months' pay. Of how he had captured the three whisky-runners one winter and then they'd overpowered him and escaped, and how he'd been fined and quartered for that. And of the other accidents, such as happened to the other men right along and nothing said.

He thought. *I'm on the toboggan in this outfit and it's time I go. Time and past time. I'll try to help out Many*

*Eagles and I'll carry out my end of Haley's plan.
Then . . .*

II

Four hours after they left the cabin on Lone Sioux Run, Prawl and Many Eagles pushed their foam-lathered horses up to the crest of a low hill and saw the Sioux camp straight ahead of them, a mile away.

The camp was spread out over a grassy little prairie, locked in by some buckbrush hills and rocky buttes. In the middle of the prairie was a lake, with the buffalo-skin tipis pitched around it. Though the camp numbered over 150 lodges, it was only one of the half-dozen Sioux camps that were scattered for a hundred miles along the Border and well up into the Canadian territories, for the Sioux were hard-pressed for food and had spread out for better hunting.

The ten unpainted Chippewa tents were still standing, among the Sioux tipis. Between the camp and the surrounding hills the Sioux horses were pasturing. Most of them were the ordinary *shaganappi* of the Sioux, but with the glasses Prawl could see little knots of horses that had been stolen from Montana and Dakota ranches; and one small *remuda* of about 20 mounts, trim fine chestnuts, bore the regimental brand of the Seventh U.S. Cavalry.

Four years previously the Sioux and their allies had fled across the 49th Parallel after the massacre of the Little Big Horn. Their demands to be given reservations in Canada had been refused, but they stayed on, ignoring the generous offers which General Terry had made to them if they would return to the States. Unwilling to see them starve, the Mounted Police had given them rations during the lean months and supplied them with enough ammunition for hunting. In Sioux fashion they had repaid the kindness by defying the government, killing small bands of Chippewas and Stonies, burning the prairies to drive game, and exhorting the bigger Canadian tribes to league with them and wipe out all the whites in

the Northwest.

Prawl had no difficulty identifying Sitting Bull's big tepee, pitched at the north end of the lake. The camp was thronged with bucks; he estimated between 300 and 400. During the few minutes that he watched, one hunting-party came in from the west with an antelope and a deer, and another party rode away to scout.

An ugly outfit to tangle with, he thought. Their being so short on grub don't make them any better tempered. I've not got a chance in a hog's head of making 'em release the Chippewas. Down here by myself in the middle of nowhere, the devil knows what they may take a notion to do to me. Well, here goes.

With Many Eagles behind him, he rode down the long slope, passed out of the scrubby timber and struck across the prairie for Sitting Bull's tent.

They were noticed as soon as they left the timber, and a tense quiet settled over the whole Sioux encampment. The older men idling around the tepees bunched up in knots, the younger bucks broke off their games, and several warriors hurried to Sitting Bull's lodge to tell the chieftain that one of the Yellow-striped *Sheemoginish* was coming into the camp.

Keeping a good grip on himself, Prawl headed between the tepees and knots of Indians straight for Sitting Bull's tent. He rode along jaunty and erect, nodding slightly at warriors whom he had seen at one time or another. A couple of them grunted "How." The rest did not reply at all. They seemed to know very well what he had come for. Their cold silence and the plain hostility on their faces sent little shivers up and down Prawl's backbone.

Though he seemed to be looking straight ahead of his nose, he kept his eyes wide open for everything about the camp. The warriors, tall and powerful men, all had magazine rifles, some Enfields, some Sharpses and Winchesters, and some Springfield Cavalry carbines. Most of them wore vicious coup-sticks in their belts. From the tepee flaps the Sioux women watched him, one shawl over two heads. Most of them were middle-aged or old squaws, as

shapeless as a bag of pemmican tied in the middle; but quite a few were young, pretty women, black-eyed, graceful, and attractive.

On every hand his experienced eyes saw the signs of lean times. The hungry-looking children, the gaunt dogs prowling around the camp, the old buffalo-leather tents—all spoke of poor hunting and short food supplies. Much as Prawl hated to see any hunger in a human community, he felt that the hunger in this camp would give Red Haley's daring idea a good chance of success.

When he came to Sitting Bull's tent, he found a dozen picked warriors blocking his way. He guessed they were the chief's bodyguard. One of them made a gesture that he should surrender his belt gun and carbine. Prawl laughed in his face. Remembering that Sitting Bull either couldn't or wouldn't talk English, he swept his eyes over the warriors and asked:

"Who talks with white man's tongue?"

No one answered.

He made the sign that he wanted an interpreter. One was speedily brought, an old Yankton Sioux sub-chief. Prawl dismounted, and followed the sub-chief into the tepee.

Against the far wall of the tepee the Sioux chieftain was sitting on a white buffalo robe, with a repeating Winchester beside him. He was a heavy-built and rather short man of nearly 50, his swart face roundish, his nose bulbous, his dark roving eyes remarkably brilliant. He wore no headdress at the time; his hair hung down across his chest in two thick braids. His quilled shirt was decorated on the right side with the figure of a red snake, on the left side with a black, rearing animal that resembled a moose. On his grimy right hand he was wearing a gold band ring with a small crest—the ring he had cut from the hand of the dead General Custer.

At his first glance Prawl was struck by the driving power in Sitting Bull's face. The mere blink of the man's eyes carried authority. Not a little of his power lay in the sphinxlike solemnity he could assume. The only pleasant

thing about him was his smile—the sullen corners of his mouth turned up, his eyes twinkled, and the hard lines of his face broke into a multitude of wrinkles.

At his gesture Prawl crouched down, a few feet in front of the chieftain. Looking directly into Sitting Bull's eyes, though his words were for the Yankton sub-chief, he went straight to the point of his visit.

"Many Eagles came to my tepee when the sun rose," he began, "and said that Sitting Bull and his warriors have formed a war lodge against the ten Chippewa families. I have seen with my own eyes that the Pointed-Skins are held prisoners here. That must not be. The laws of the Big Chief Woman forbid it."

The Yankton sub-chief interpreted. Prawl waited a moment to see how Sitting Bull would take the demand. But the chieftain did not answer; not a muscle of his face moved. He simply kept his eyes fastened on the constable.

"This land," Prawl continued, striking the ground with his hand, "is the hunting-territory of the Pointed-Skins. Sitting Bull and his warriors have no right to it except what right the Pointed-Skins are willing to give them. Many Eagles and his ten families were camping here first beside this lake, hunting in these hills. Sitting Bull should have pitched his lodges somewhere else. But he can stay here if he releases the Pointed-Skins and allows them to leave."

When the speech had been translated the Sioux chief sat for a moment, impassive, blinking his eyes slowly. Prawl expected him to start a harangue. But instead the Sioux leaned forward slightly, his lips opened, and he spoke one flat resounding English syllable: "No!"

At the bullet-hard refusal, Prawl jerked a little in spite of himself. The cold, hypnotic gaze of the chief made him uncomfortable. But he kept control of himself and returned the stare.

"You must release the Pointed-Skins," he repeated, more brusquely. "You must give them back their ponies, their dogs, their weapons. They must be safely out of this camp before the noon sun peeps through the smoke-hole

of this tepee."

Sitting Bull did not argue. He simply leveled a finger at the flap-door of his lodge in a curt order for Prawl to get out—while the getting was good.

A hot anger jiggled through Prawl. He fought it down, knowing that anger would only provide the Sioux with an excuse to start something. He could see with half an eye that not only did Sitting Bull intend to blot out the little Chippewa band, but that he himself was in ugly danger. Riding into this Sioux camp had been like walking into a rattler den. But he had anticipated trouble and during the four-hour ride he had thought out his strategy. Paying no attention to Sitting Bull's order, he said:

"When I go, the Pointed-Skins will go with me. Do you want Chief Milton to be told how you have treated them?"

"Your Chief Milton—*splaa!*" Sitting Bull grunted scornfully. "The Pointed-Skins will stay here. I am a chief of many warriors. Thunder is my relative. I say the Pointed-Skins will stay here. They are dogs."

Prawl had heard those words before from Indian lips, and understood them perfectly. When every other excuse for a base deed was lacking, the party upon whom the deed was perpetrated was simply a dog!

In slow, curt words Prawl said, "In the Sioux camps there is hunger. Few buffalo have come up across the land of gray chalk this summer. In the hungry camps of the other Sioux chieftains, like Pretty Bear and Spotted Cougar, there is much whispered grumbling against Sitting Bull. They are saying that he has led them into a barren land and is keeping them there—"

"You lie!" Sitting Bull broke in, in good round English. "Who is there that dares lift his voice against the medicine chief of all the Sioux?"

Prawl saw by the very vehemence of the denial that he had hit a touchy spot; that Sitting Bull was not too sure of his power over the sub-chiefs.

"So I lie," he said, with a hard grin at the Sioux. "So there is no rumbling against Sitting Bull in the hungry

camps. Perhaps there is even no hunger. Perhaps those camps do not need the wagon train of food that Chief Milton is about to send to them."

He paused a moment, meeting the glittery black eyes of the Little Big Horn victor. "But those wagons of food and other potlatch," he went on, "will never come to the Sioux camps if the Chippewas of Many Eagles's band are killed here. What then will the other camps and the chiefs like Pretty Bear and Spotted Cougar say about Sitting Bull?"

The Sioux leaned forward and there was an ugly look on his face. "Who will tell Chief Milton that the Chippewa dogs were killed?"

"I will!" Prawl said coolly.

The threat and defiance inflamed Sitting Bull. He reached for his Winchester and pointed it at the Mounted constable, his face twisting with violent anger. "You will not live to see your Chief Milton again, *Sheemoginish*," he rasped. "You have raised your hand in a threat against me. You have promised you will speak an evil word against me. Good."

He called out an order. One by one the dozen warriors outside came filing in and squatted around the walls of the lodge, rifles across their knees. Prawl did not move or bat an eye. He realized that death was brushing very close against him. He knew that Sitting Bull had called in the other Indians so that they could see him murder one of the formidable *Sheemoginish*. But death had brushed him before, and he believed that he still held a good strong card.

"You have said," Sitting Bull went on in his cold, deadly tones, "that you will not go until the Pointed-Skins go with you. You love the Pointed-Skins; they are your brothers. Good—you will stay with them, here in my camp. It is good that I should do the same to you as I shall do to your brothers. So Chief Milton's ears will go hungry. There will be no one alive to tell what happened to his warrior, the Lone Fire, or his friends, the Pointed-Skins."

Prawl merely stared at the chieftain and grinned his

hard grin. For a long moment the tension hung, all eyes in the lodge upon the two of them. In the silence a vague, puzzled look crept into Sitting Bull's eyes. He seemed to be wondering how the white man could be so iron-hard, so utterly unaffected by the threat of death.

Finally Prawl said, "Do you think I am guileless as a papoose on its mother's back? Do you think I would trust myself in the camp of Sitting Bull, who has killed many white men and who has killed wantonly? Does not Chief Milton know where I went and where I am, and will he not know what has happened to me unless I return? Do you think that I did not send him word before I rode off to the camp of Sitting Bull with Many Eagles?"

A dull-gray fear spread over Sitting Bull's coppery face. "You lie!" he growled. "Chief Milton does not know where you went. You did not see him."

Prawl shrugged. "I sent word to him by the Cree 'breed, Colquhuon. The 'breed came to me with a message when the sun rose, and by him I sent word back to Chief Milton. If I do not return, he will know that you have killed the Chippewas and killed me. That is the word which I sent to him by the 'breed."

He shrugged again. "Of course you can kill me," he said. "There are twelve warriors in this lodge and three hundred warriors outside, and I am a Lone Fire. You can tie rocks to me and throw me to the turtles in the lake. You can knock the brains out of the Pointed-Skin warriors and strangle their women. You are thirty men to their one. But if you lay hands on me or my friends, the Chippewas, then the food wagons will not roll out of Chief Milton's post. Then the hungry camps of the other Sioux will not have food. And the moose-bird will tell every Sioux why there is hunger in his lodge. The moose-bird will say that it was because of Sitting Bull."

He saw the shock of uneasiness that went around the circle of warriors. He could see that his words had jolted Sitting Bull clear to the chieftain's moccasins. But the man was angry and resentful and his finger was on the trigger of the Winchester.

"No more food or ammunition to hunt game with," Prawl went on, "will Chief Milton ever give you. He will order you back across the Line, and will summon other Yellow-Stripes and soldiers of the *Shagalasha* to make you go. The Crees and Blackfeet are friends of the *Sheemoginish*; if you kill one of us, they too will dig up the avenging hatchet. The whole *Mela Haska* nation is your enemy now. If you make enemy of the *Shagalasha* too, then you will have no place on earth to pitch your tepee.

"What good will it bring your camp to kill these Pointed-Skins? None. It would be a papoose's foolishness to pull destruction down upon yourself for no reason at all. A wise chief will let the Pointed-Skins go in peace."

A ripple of the approving "How!" ran around the circle of men. Prawl could see the Sioux chieftain slowly wilting. In a minute or two the muzzle of the Winchester lowered. With a leap of heart Prawl realized that he had won this grim little game. He had saved not only his own life but the lives of the Chippewa men, women, and children.

"Well," he demanded, "do I go and the Chippewas with me? Or do I stay here?"

To cover up his submission as gracefully as possible, the chief launched into a long oration, cataloging the miseries that he had received at the hands of the *Mela Haska*; and bemoaning the Big Chief Woman's edict that the Sioux would be given no land in Canada.

Prawl listened for a little while, contemptuously. The change from a haughty, murderous-minded chief to a self-pitying innocent was so blatant that even some of the Sioux warriors looked ashamed.

Finally he cut Sitting Bull's oration short with a gesture and stood up. Ignoring the chief's offer to shake hands, he said, "If any of your men ride after the Chippewas and try to ambush or kill them, I will know about it, and Chief Milton will hear of it," and he strode out of the tent.

Outside he ordered Many Eagles, "Get your tepees down, gather your ponies, and be ready to leave here in twenty minutes. I'll ride along with you a few miles. A

Sioux promise isn't worth a bodewash chip, and Sitting Bull's promise is worth even less."

He sat on his mare by the lake edge while the Chippewa lodges came down and the little band he had saved got together. Then at their head he rode out of the Sioux camp, without a glance to right or left.

Four miles to the east he stopped on a swell and beckoned Many Eagles up beside him. "Here our trails fork. I go to the south. I can watch over you no longer. You must ride east all day and all night. You must thereafter keep a safe distance from the Sioux."

"But to the east," Many Eagles objected, "there is no buffalo. To the south—"

"My orders!" Prawl cut him short. "If you go south and the Sioux capture you again, I will not be around to haul you out of the fire." He swallowed hard, remembering his note to Inspector Milton—the note which had burned his bridges, irrecallably now. "In less suns than you have fingers on one hand I will not be a *Sheemoginish* at all but will be riding a lone trail, down in the *Mela Haska* land."

III

Feeling miserable in spite of his lone-handed victory over the formidable Sioux chief, Prawl headed southwest toward the place that Red Haley had indicated on the chart. It was off his regular patrol trail, but he had been there several times and knew the route well.

He pushed the mare along at a good clip, wanting to get his work over with before night if he possibly could. The hours were vital. And if any trouble came on, he could make his getaway during the darkness. He knew there were Sioux scouting-parties all around him in the hills. If some party sighted him and got suspicious of his being so far off his usual patrol, they would follow and watch and catch him dead in the act.

The miles were slow and toilsome. To avoid being sighted, he kept to the timber belts as much as he could,

and this made the trip longer and harder. The timber was mostly second growth, where he had to plow through buckbrush, briars, and sapling windfall. Time and again he had to detour around some scouting-party or hide while one passed him.

Sundown found him still ten miles from his goal, tired, hungry, and saddle-cramped. But still he pushed on. Then darkness came, with no moon, and he had to stop.

He camped in a little prairie where there were sweet grass for the mare and a small alkali pond for water. As he beat through the niggerhead around the pond in hopes of finding a turtle, he plumped into a brood of mallards almost big enough to fly. They exploded under his feet and scattered in a dozen directions, with a *quawk* that almost knocked him over.

The flags were shoulder-high, the water knee-deep, the marsh dark and forbidding, but he had distributed most of his food to the Chippewa youngsters and gone without eating for 15 hours and was ravenously hungry. With a willow club he grimly started after the ducks—splashing, slipping, sprawling full length at times when he ran into potholes.

When he emerged from the niggerhead 20 minutes later, he was soaked wet and plastered with mud, but he had two tender young mallards in his sack.

At a small fire, sunk deep in the sod so that the Sioux could not see it, he dried his clothes and broiled the ducks. He ate one, wrapped the other in leaves for reference the next day, and went to sleep early.

At the first glint of gray the next morning he was up and in the saddle. The remaining five miles he covered in an hour. A little before sunrise he rode up a long slope covered with lodgepole timber, and stopped just below the crest. Habitually cautious when Indians were around, he dismounted in a clump of vines and windfall and picketed the mare securely.

"Better lay low and keep quiet, Molly m'lady," he cautioned. "No whinnying at any Indian *shaganappi*. If the Sioux catch us here, they'll stick us as full of spears as a

pincushion is full of needles." Keeping screened from sight, he crept up to the ridge-line.

Below him lay a long valley, stretching south across the Border. Its slopes on each side were steep and gutted with washouts; and at the top of the slopes a rimrock hemmed the valley in. Since the last time he had seen it, the appearance of the valley had changed radically. From bluff to bluff a prairie fire had swept down through it, destroying the timber and the buckbrush as far as he could see. Indian work, he guessed, to drive game. The valley was clothed now with sedge grass whipping in the northeast breeze and with stirrup-high shrubbery, brown and dry. A little stream wound down the valley center, widening here and there into ponds and small green prairies.

In one of these meadows, about two-thirds of a mile away, a herd of 2000 buffaloes were pasturing on the aromatic bunch grass. They were headed north toward him. Several dozen bulls were crossing the brown strip to the next green patch, while a small band of cows and calves had fallen a quarter-mile behind the main drove.

The size of the herd, the direction they were taking, and the conspicuous white yearling bull in their midst, left no doubt on earth that they were the herd that Red Haley had written about. In fact, buffaloes were so scarce in that region that there could hardly be any other herd within 300 miles.

Moving slowly, perhaps a mile an hour, they were heading for a swamp country to the north where they could find green pasture in the muskeg flats. They had scarcely come 20 miles since Haley wrote about them. A huge flock of "coffee-heads" accompanied the herd, perching on the backs of the shaggy animals and flying around above them incessantly. Farther down the valley grazed a pair of large elk. Above the herd, not 300 yards from Prawl, were five cabbry or white-tailed antelope.

As he lay behind the screen of brush and watched, Prawl realized that he would have only one chance at carrying out his part of the plan, and would have to make good on his first try. While the herd was a little large for

one man to handle, it was not spread out, but compact and manageable. He believed that his simplest course was to gallop down the slope straight at the buffaloes, shooting, waving his saddle blanket and yelling. In all likelihood this would stampede the lead bulls back into the main herd; the main herd would be thrown into a panic, and the whole drove would go thundering down the valley.

If he rode their tails hard and kept up the scare, he could have them across the Border in less than two hours—safely out of Sioux reach. Neither wild buffaloes nor wild horses could draw the American Sioux back across that fateful line. And down there Red Haley and two fellow conspirators from the Cavalry troop would take the herd over and whoop it on south.

He was just on the point of starting his campaign when a little incident down the valley caught his eye. He had been noticing a slight uneasiness among the buffaloes, but had given it no second thought. Now the incident he saw stopped him dead short. If he had not had a keen eye and known buffaloes pretty well, he would have ridden unawares into a death trap.

Near a patch of shrubbery at the lower end of the herd, eight cows and their calves snorted suddenly in alarm, ran a hundred yards up the valley, then stopped, whirled around and looked back, as though making up their slow minds whether or not to be scared. Nothing happened, and in a few minutes they started pasturing again.

Prawl wondered what had scared them. If they had seen or winded a predatory animal, like a wolf or a puma, the cows would have bunched together and stood their ground instead of running as they did. That was buffalo nature.

With a strong hunch that something was wrong, he bellied out along the ridge-line till he had a good view of the shrubbery patch that the cows had shied at, and got out his Service binoculars. He had scarcely brought the patch into clear focus when he tensed and swore beneath his breath— Just inside the thicket five Indians lay

motionless, watching the buffaloes.

What tribe they belonged to he could not make out for sure, at that distance; he merely could see that all five were strapping big warriors armed with rifles. But he guessed that they were Sioux. Probably they had been out scouting for game and spotted the buffaloes in the valley.

He wondered if they had seen him. Likely not, or they would have inched back to better cover.

It was clear enough why they were lying low and watching the buffaloes. By themselves the five could not hope to kill more than a few dozen of the animals. Their strategy was to let the herd work north, maybe nudging it little by little, with infinite patience and caution, toward a swamp country known as the *Eaux Mortes* or Dead Waters. In that maze of muskeg and boggy streams a couple of hundred warriors, summoned from the camps, could slaughter the herd to the last hoof.

Exactly as Red Haley had said in his letter, those 2000 buffaloes were of supreme importance to the Sioux. If the Indians got them, they could defy the governments on both sides of the Border. If they failed to get them, then they would have to make peace. The camps even then, in summertime, were sadly in need of meat. By fall and throughout the winter they would need food desperately. But not if they got these 2000 buffaloes. Besides giving them a mountainous stock of meat, the herd would supply them with new robes, clothes, tepees, and the hundred small articles which they made from the animal.

"But how the Billy Hell," Prawl swore, "can I turn those buffaloes now? The minute I show myself and try to stampede that herd, those Sioux will also jump out of cover and try to do the same. They'd drive the buffaloes past me and on north in spite of all I could do. And they'd shoot me in the bargain. Against the five of 'em, I wouldn't have a chance."

For half an hour he lay there watching the Sioux and wrestling with the problem of how to stampede the buffaloes down the valley and across the Border. In spite of

the danger to himself, he could not give up the idea. It was too tremendous an opportunity to make the warlike Sioux give in and to stop the bloodshed and chaos of that whole country.

Finally he decided on a plan. It was a doubtful, dangerous business, but it was the only scheme he could think of.

After studying the stiff northeast breeze and the lay of the valley, he backed down from the ridge-line to a point 100 feet below the crest, gathered a handful of dry grass, and kindled it, and then scattered it in a line out along the slope. Working feverishly, he scattered other patches of fire out along the hillside until he had a fire-line 500 feet long—crackling, gathering speed before the breeze, and moving up toward the crest of the ridge.

His mare, frightened by the dread flames, had started rearing and struggling. He raced back and quieted her, then seized his rifle and hurried up the ridge-line to watch.

The fire was still out of sight of the buffaloes. The lead bulls kept throwing their heads up, sniffing the air, and rumbling, but they did not bolt. The five Sioux had stood up in the thicket and were looking at the smoke with amazed eyes. Plainly the fire had given them a sharp surprise. They could not figure it, or get their wits together and try to counteract it.

Gathering speed, the fire rolled up on the slope toward the crest. There the stiff breeze caught it squarely. The crackling swelled to an ominous roar; the flames seemed suddenly to leap to life in the dry sedge, and the long yellow tongues began jumping ahead. In a solid wall the fire swept over the ridge and rolled down the valley with near-hurricane speed and force.

For a minute or two the buffalo herd stared stupidly at the onrushing fire. Then the drove began to mill around. The lead bulls bellowed and pawed the ground. The calves stood hunched against the cows, and the cloud of coffee-heads took to the air, wheeling and chortling in panic.

Then the wind flung a festoon of smoke down into the

herd, and they broke. As one animal they whirled around, and with a flip of 2000 tails they were off down the valley, thundering ahead of the yellow prairie fiend.

Fascinated, Prawl watched the mighty spectacle. The green patches of muskeg quivered like huge bowls of jelly as the herd plunged across them. Echoing from bluff to bluff, the roar of their stampede filled the whole valley. The pair of elks downstream turned tail and fled. Fast as the buffaloes went, the five antelopes sailed around them like white-rumped birds. With a shrill clamor, the cloud of coffee-heads rose high in the air, above the smoke and heat, and went sweeping down the valley with the stampede.

In the thicket down valley, the five Indians sprang from their cover and tried to halt the mad charge. But Sitting Bull and all his warriors could not have stopped that wild run. The Sioux were in danger of being engulfed and killed. Barely in time they made it to a deep washout where they had tethered their ponies, leaped on their mounts, galloped out of the path, and let the herd thunder past.

Prawl paid little more attention to the Indians just then. He was watching that herd. Swerving neither to right or left, it tore straight on down the valley for the Border. A few of the younger calves and weaker cows dropped behind, but only a few. In a dark, wavelike mass the herd thundered on and on. Slowly the roar of them died away. Then the smoke from the green muskeg patches hid them from his view. But they were still running at top speed, and he knew that they would run their panic out before they stopped. They would roll on and on down the valley and across the Border and miles beyond the Border, where Haley and the two troopers could pick them up and whoop them still farther south.

A grim triumph ran through Prawl like an exultation. He rubbed his singed face and swore. "There goes your damn supply of meat, Sitting Bull! Now maybe you'll listen to reason—or if you don't, the other Sioux chiefs will!"

Then the realization of his own danger came home to him, joltingly. He backed down from the ridge-line and ran toward the horse.

"We'd better beat hell and tanbark away from here, Molly m'lady," he jerked out, unpicketing her and springing into the saddle. "Those five Sioux will swing around this way to see what the devil started that fire, and they'll be sure to find our tracks. If we don't put our foot in front of our nose and git, they'll shoot us colder than a dead dog's nose."

IV

Knowing that he would be pursued, Prawl headed straight east in order to get to good horseback country as quickly as possible. Given half a chance, the mare could outrun the grass-fed ponies in a long endurance chase, but in hill country or swampland the Sioux could fan out and bring her to bay.

As the mare settled into a swift, steady gallop and the valley slowly receded, he kept turning in the saddle and looking back. His common sense told him that the five Sioux were on his trail and would cling to it vengefully. But he could see nothing of them and he grew more and more confident that the mare would outrun their *shaganappi*.

As he galloped along, searching out the best route ahead for his horse, he felt proud of the work he had done in the last 24 hours. He had ridden into Sitting Bull's camp alone, told the chieftain exactly what to do, and with a poker-faced lie had bluffed him into doing it. Lone-handed still, he had just turned a trick which might force the Sioux to return to the States that fall, or at the least, would give the Canadian authorities the power to make them stop raiding and killing as they had been doing. With the 2000 buffaloes in their possession, they could have gone into winter camp north of the Border and thumbed their noses at the Mounted Police and Cavalry alike. But without that herd they were dependent on those food wagons.

Already there was unrest and a whisper of rebellion among the other Sioux chieftains. Sitting Bull had been telling them over and over, "When the buffaloes come north—" and had quieted the rebellion with the promise of rich hunting. Now Sitting Bull would have to sing a different song.

He wondered what Inspector Milton would say if the officer knew about his turning the herd of buffaloes back south. "Milton can go to hell," he growled beneath his breath. "He'd probably have me court-martialed for doing something without orders. That's how things happen to a fellow when he's on the bamboo slide."

On the crest of a hill eight miles from the valley, he halted and wheeled the mare around, and looked back over the trail. No Sioux horsemen. With his glasses he watched the deerbrush swell three miles west, which he had ridden across. He did not have long to wait. Over the swell came the five Sioux, riding breakneck and flung out in a line, as a pack of well-trained hounds will trail.

Their speed and the grim concentration about them sent a little chill of foreboding through Prawl. He wheeled and galloped on, muttering. "Those five specimens mean business, Molly m'lady. If we let 'em get in gun range of us, we're sunk."

Still he felt confident enough. The Indians were a good two miles behind him, and a stern chase is a long chase. He believed the mare could hold her own with the *shaganappi* ponies till she struck the hard prairie ten miles east. Once on the open plains, she would run off and leave the ponies standing still.

To the east the hills were fewer now and the grassy stretches between them were broader and nearly free of brush. Three miles ahead of him stood a clay knob, crowned with wind-gnarled pines, just to the north of his route. A mile south of it, another knob rose up. He decided to cut in between the two hills, taking his chances on their having lookout parties on them, rather than swing around them in the brushy marsh country on either side.

When he looked back the next time, he noticed that the

five Sioux had stopped on top of a swell. This seemed queer; he wondered what they were up to. Out of his experience with the Plains tribes, he knew it was safest to be sure of nothing where an Indian was concerned, and always to be on the lookout for tricks.

Uneasy, he reined the mare in, stopped, and focused his glasses on the five. As he watched them, he caught a tiny bright glint. For a moment he thought it was the sun glistening on some silver ornament of saddle or bridle. But then the glint flashed again—a second, third, and fourth time.

He turned and pointed the glasses at the north clay knob. A jolt went through him as he picked up an answering flash from the storm-gnarled pines. Mirror signals! As he had feared, there *was* a scouting-party on that knob. They were squarely in his path, and his five pursuers had flashed them a message to head him off. He knew this as well as he knew his own name.

"Lord above, Molly," he breathed, "they've got us boxed! We'll have to swing north of that knob through the rough country. We probably can outrun the five behind us, but those on the knob can cut straight across our path. Molly, you've got to beat 'em somehow."

He wheeled north, leaned forward in the saddle and spoke a few sharp words to the mare. She responded with a splendid burst of speed. If any horse could have carried him out of that trap, Molly m'lady would have done it. If she had had level ground in front of her nose, she would have brought him through, even though the Indians were cutting across the short angle. But she had to travel two miles to their one, and the going was slow and rough.

From the north clay knob he saw four Sioux gallop out upon the level and start to head him off. He thought of swinging south of the twin hills but remembered the watery low country there and threw the idea out. Even to the north the country was bad enough. Between the north clay knob and a small *Eaux Mortes* region to the north there was a narrow passageway of only four miles. He had to get through that, or—

Long before he was abreast of the clay knob, he saw that he could never get through that passageway. The four Sioux, diagonaling across, were drawing swiftly within rifle range. He whirled in the saddle and looked back. His five pursuers, cutting across his long swing, were also closing in. Between the two of them he was pinned against the impassable *Eaux Mortes*.

Rather than plunge into that soup-thin muskeg, where the Sioux could shoot him like some floundering animal, he decided to hole in and have it out with the two parties at rifle point. Reining the mare up short, he rose in the stirrups and looked around. A dozen rods to the right he saw a sink-in, a deep little pocket. It was not much of a shelter but nothing better was in sight. Making up his mind quickly, he cantered across to it and led the mare down into the cup-shaped depression.

"Down, Molly m'lady," he said, as the mare looked at him quizzically. "Down, girl. You've done your level best, and a good best it was. The rest is up to me."

At his order the mare lay down as obediently as any dog would have done. Prawl ran his hand along his cartridge belt, shook the saddle-stiffness out of his frame, and looked around his little shelter.

A small, diamond-shaped sink-in, it was about 20 feet long, 12 feet wide, and shoulder-deep. The mare lying down would be completely protected, and he himself would have fairly good shelter. Luckily there were no gullies near that the Sioux could use to sneak in on him. For several hundred feet around, the ground was covered with short matted grass and yellow flowers, but there was no brush or rocks that would give the Sioux any cover.

Cautiously he raised his head and looked for his enemies. The party of four had already come up within 600 yards, and were riding around him in a circle, flat on their ponies. Presently they were joined by the five others, and he had nine rifle-armed Sioux circling him, yelling, and occasionally sending a harmless bullet in his direction.

He hoped they would edge in closer but they did not. He would have given his ears for a long-barreled Win-

chester. His Snider carbine was good enough at 300 yards but at 600 it was no match for the guns of the Indians.

Nevertheless he tried with it. Judging elevation carefully, he took a long aim and fired three shots at the nearest Sioux. At the first spurt of fire the Indian ducked out of danger on the far side of his pony. At the third the pony stumbled and fell dead, shot through the heart.

From the cover of its body, the Indian poured five wrathful bullets at Prawl, and the other eight emptied their rifles at him. But he had popped down like a gopher in its hole and the bullets whined harmlessly overhead.

The Sioux stopped yelling and a silence fell. Prawl lifted his head cautiously over the bank to see what his enemies were up to now. They had dismounted and were starting to come in at him. Not openly, in a rush, but in the Indian way of slipping up.

They certainly were adept at the game, he thought, watching them. They hardly had cover enough out there to shield a rabbit; but as they wriggled toward him, bellying over the matted grass and hiding behind clumps of the yellow flowers, he could not have made them out without his binoculars.

He waited until the nearest Indian, a sub-chief of some sort, was within 400 yards of his shelter. Taking very careful aim, he shot twice. One of his bullets struck. The Sioux scrambled to his feet, tried to run, but collapsed within a few feet.

The other eight changed their minds about sneaking up on the lone, grim red-jacket in the little sink-in. Evidently they realized that with his carbine and revolver he could drop four or five of them before they could close in and kill him. One by one they started backing off—crawling over the grass and through the flowers till they were at a safe distance.

The wounded Indian, 400 yards away, was futilely trying to get back out of rifle range. It seemed he had been shot through the hip. Plainly he was in great pain, but he endured it silently. Watching, Prawl was stirred

to pity, enemy or no enemy. Keeping the best watch he could on the other eight Sioux, he stood up in plain view and jerked his arms back and forth, with palms extended.

The Sioux recognized the truce signal. They half rose, cautiously, their rifle butts resting on the ground. When Prawl saw this, he made signs that two of them should come in, get their wounded man, and carry him back where they could look after him. Then he laid his Snider on the ground and folded his arms.

Not one of the eight moved. They simply stood in their tracks, staring at him, and waited, plainly believing that he was trying to lure them within range.

Prawl swore in anger. "You damned sneaks," he called out at them, "if you weren't so hellish treacherous yourselves, you wouldn't see treachery in everybody else. Come in and get your partner, or—"

He picked up his carbine and leveled it at the wounded Indian, as a threat that if they did not come and get the man, he would kill the Sioux himself. The Indians seemed to understand his gestures if not his words. When he laid his Snider on the ground again, two of them came loping in, carried the wounded sub-chief back out of range, and deposited him on the prairie about 800 yards away. But they did not dress his wound or pay any further attention to him.

Then, as a token that the truce was over, one of them whipped up his rifle and shot at Prawl.

Sitting on their horses, they held a powwow. Prawl watched them uneasily, wondering what they were cooking up. The Indian whom he had unhorsed was standing in the middle of the half-circle, looking up at the other seven and gesticulating as he talked. He seemed to be sketching their scheme, whatever it was. Prawl reached for his glasses and drew the powwow up close, studying the gestures of the Indian intently.

Little by little he pieced their scheme together, and his face paled as their purpose dawned on him. He turned to Molly.

"They're going to try to burn us out of here, girl. And

they can do it, too, unless we do something and do it fast. That mat of grass is dry as tinder and this wind is strong enough to fan it into a pipper, like we sent down at the buffaloes. It won't last long, that fire—but neither will we."

Working swiftly, he reached out and gathered a handful of dry grass, wadded it into a ball, tied it together with a long string of rawhide, and then set it afire. With one eye on the Sioux, he leaped out of the sink-in and raced out in the direction of the wind 50 or 60 feet. The Indians saw him, realized instantly what he was doing and swung in toward him on their ponies, shooting on the jump. Prawl tried hard not to pay any attention or even look at them. Dragging the burning ball across the matted grass, he laid down a line of fire 100 feet long in front of his shelter, before the wad of grass burned out. Bullets were kicking into the sod around him as he finished. Dodging and zigzagging he raced back to cover, slid into the hole untouched, grabbed up his Snider, and drove the Sioux back out of range with a hot little burst.

At a dozen points along his 100-foot line his fire was catching slowly. The spots burned together until they formed a solid front and the fire-line came surging toward him, fanned by the stiff breeze.

By the time the Indians had started their fire, his own had burned halfway to the sink-in. In the short space of 50 feet it could not get up much smoke or heat. As it crept toward the hole, he crouched down beside Molly, holding her firmly and quieting her instinctive dread.

In less than five minutes his back-fire had reached the hole, split to each side of it, crept around it and swept on south, leaving a wedge of unburned grass on the windward side of his cover. He burned this wedge also, to have a clean strip all around.

Meanwhile, the Sioux had gone back three-quarters of a mile and started a fire-line with a half-mile front. Pushed along by the strong wind, their fire rose higher and higher as it came toward him. Prawl could only watch it, helpless, with a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach. Against a wall of fire like that, his 50 or 60 feet was a piti-

fully scant protection. It might save him and it might not.

Gathering speed and fierceness, the fire rolled on and on, nearer. Blackbirds, meadowlarks, and sparrows flushed ahead of the flames and came darting over him, with shrill piping cries of terror. Curlews and upland plovers rose from the prairie and zoomed straight up out of sight to escape the yellow fiend. A kit fox, a coyote, and half a dozen cottontails went clipping past. Then a pair of big blue racers, bloated with field mice and gophers, glided into the pit, darting their forked tongues at him and the horse.

The heat and smoke and crackling of the fire, and now the two big snakes, threw the mare in a panic. She would have jumped out of the hole and galloped off if Prawl had not leaped and seized her bridle. With his free hand he drew his revolver, shot the snakes, and kicked them out of the pit.

The next instant the wall of fire was upon him. For a little time he felt as though he were being roasted alive. Fighting for breath and battling the frenzied horse, he was blanketed and blinded by the smoke, stinging sparks, and scorching heat.

Mercifully, the black minute was soon over with. The fire split on each side of his protecting swath, the wind whipped it past him, and it went rolling away south across the prairie.

He managed to quiet the horse again, and picketed her as best he could to a rock. With a dozen smarting burns on his face and hands, he picked up his Snider and peered out through the lingering smoke for a glimpse of his enemies.

About 400 yards away, they were dashing back and forth, trying to see what had happened to him.

"Damn it, I'll show you what!" he snarled, and laid his carbine against his cheek.

His quick hot burst toppled one of the Indians from his pony, dead before he touched the ground. The others scattered like demons in the wispy smoke. Prawl kept jerking his head all around, watching in every direction,

but he saw nothing more of his enemies at all, till gradually the last smoldering clumps of grass burned out and the wind whipped the smoke entirely away.

Then he saw his seven enemies again. About 1000 yards to the south of his shelter, they were holding another powwow. Again he studied them intently with his binoculars, trying to read their gestures and see what they were cooking up this time. But he could not tell.

After nearly half an hour of powwowing, they left the unhorsed Sioux and two others there to snipe at him and keep him confined to the sink-in, while the other four galloped off toward the north clay knob. For a little while he thought they were going to summon help, but as the four rode up the hillside to the first trees and set to work, he quickly realized what their new scheme was.

With their belt axes they chopped down a dozen lodge-pole pines, trimmed the trunks roughly to ten-foot lengths, hitched their ponies to the timbers, and snaked them out across the level toward his sink-in. At a safe distance they stopped and began their final preparations.

Silent and shaken, Prawl watched, the cold fingers of fear closing around his heart. There was no back-firing this time; no way of spiking this plan against him.

With tomahawks and leather thongs the Sioux fashioned a heavy, doorlike barricade three feet high, several feet wide, and three poles thick. Two runners, adzed roughly flat on the bottom side, were put under it, like *travois* drag-poles, so that it could be pushed forward, and a prop behind kept it from falling backward.

When the contraption was ready, four of the Sioux got behind it and started pushing. The barricade began to move forward, as steadily and irresistibly as the hand of Fate.

Prawl watched it in a grim and helpless silence. He knew that the Sioux intended to push it right up to the edge of the sink-in and shoot him at point-blank range. The ten or 12 inches of tough green timber would be absolutely impervious to his rifle bullets. On the other side of him, 800 yards away, the three other Sioux were on

guard against his making any break.

Yard by slow yard the barricade came on and on. When it was 250 yards away, Prawl began shooting at it, searching for some chink or weak place where he could drive a bullet through. Again and again he emptied his clip into the damnable thing. But he might as well have been throwing his lead against a rock bluff.

He stopped shooting, and the silence fell again. The three Sioux on the other side of him had broken off their yelling, and those behind the barricade were quiet, intent only on their work.

With a hard, twisted grin on his lips, Prawl laid his carbine aside and pulled out his heavy Enfield revolver. It would be a faster and better weapon for the face-to-face battle when the Sioux would leap from behind that barricade and jump down upon him. He took off his cumbersome cartridge belt; there would be no time for any reloading. He untethered the mare and fondled her ears a moment and said:

"Molly m'lady, don't you let 'em make a damn *shaganappi* out of you. When the last shooting starts, you make a break, you beat hell and tanbark away from here. You've got a good chance; they'll be plumb busy with me."

Lying flat against the sloping bank, he kicked a firm toehold in the ground and waited for the Sioux.

Overhead, a golden eagle hung motionless against the sky, so high that Prawl could barely catch its screaming *chak-chak-chak*. Three feet in front of him a little field mouse thrust its wiggling nose out of a hole and fearfully inspected the blackened sod. A prairie lark came flying back to its destroyed home, perched on an old buffalo skull, and sang disconsolately. A flock of magpies, their long tails awkward in the stiff breeze, beat heavily over him and flew on to the north clay knob. They alighted for a minute or two in a storm-gnarled pine. Then, suddenly frightened at something there in the timber, they let out a *quawk* of alarm and wheeled on south.

Prawl wondered what had frightened them. Then he wondered why he should be wondering at so trivial a

thing, when death was slowly creeping toward him.

In the taut silence he suddenly heard a yelp from the wounded sub-chief—a high-pitched and piercing yell. He jerked his head around and saw that the sub-chief had risen to his knees and was gesticulating at the other Sioux. Then the three dismounted Sioux sprang to their feet and darted to their ponies, as though to get away from there on the jump. In bewilderment Prawl saw them leap on their *shaganappi* and head west at breakneck speed.

“What the c-c-condamnsternation?” he breathed. “What the devil is happening now?”

The barricade abruptly halted. The four Sioux behind it started yelling and running—running at a half-crouch toward their own mounts.

With astonished eyes Prawl saw a close-riding band of Indians break out of the buckbrush at the foot of the north clay knob and come tearing across the level toward him, lashing their ponies, and yelling like fiends.

Great God John! the thought jiggled across his mind. *Fourteen more Smokies!* The sudden turn to things left him a little stunned and he could not think clearly. *Fourteen more of 'em—as if I didn't have enough to argue with already!*

Then it dawned on him that the 14 newcomers must be enemies of the Sioux and that the Sioux were fleeing from them in panic. He thought, *Fourteen—why, why that's—that's the same number as in Many Eagles's band! Why, it must be the Chippewa braves. They must have disobeyed me and swung down in this direction!*

With yells and rifle shots the 14 Chippewas came spanking across the level prairie. Half a dozen of them broke away and took after the four dismounted Sioux. One of them angled off toward the wounded sub-chief, and Prawl heard a single rifle shot. Several of them started to veer in the direction of the three Sioux who had reached their ponies, but they soon saw that the chase was hopeless and galloped back to the rest of the Chippewa band.

In a sort of daze Prawl climbed out of his little sink-in

and watched. The battle between the six mounted Chippewas and the four Sioux afoot was hot and fierce but short.

Trying to appear totally unconcerned, as a good Policeman should, Prawl buckled his cartridge belt on, caught up his rifle, led the mare out of the hole, and was waiting for the Chippewas when they rode up.

Many Eagles slipped off his horse and started explaining. His lodges, he said, were pitched four miles east of the north clay knob. He had seen the smoke of the prairie fire and had ridden up the knob to see the cause. Looking down from the wooded hill, he had seen the sorrel horse, seen one man fighting the eight Sioux, and had known that it was the Lone Fire. So— He finished with a grunt and a shrug of his shoulders.

Prawl tried hard to frown and look severe. "I thought I ordered you to high-tail it east, out of range of the Sioux," he said sternly. "It was plain luck that you didn't run into a big scouting-party and find yourself in the Sioux cooking-pot again. But I'll—this time I'll overlook it. You go and get your band and ride northeast with me to *Métis River*. From there on you'll be pretty safe."

Many Eagles looked down at the ground and scraped the blackened sod with his moccasin. "The Lone Fire *Sheemoginish* speaks with a very wise tongue," he said. "After this fight with the Sioux, it is well that the Chippewas should do as the Lone Fire says."

"Good," Prawl answered. He allowed himself to unbend a little and offered his hand to the Chippewa leader. "You have proved yourself a true friend of the *Sheemoginish*. They do not forget their friends."

He took a last look at the barricade and the little sink-in where he had awaited death, and then slowly climbed into the saddle.

V

It was dusk of the next day when Prawl reached the cabin on Lone Sioux. He was hungry and fagged out and

tormented with doubt as to what his next step should be. After giving Molly an extra-generous feeding of oats and picketing her behind the cabin, he trudged inside, swallowed a few bites of food himself, and lay down on his bunk, too tired to take off his clothes.

But for all his tiredness, he lay sleepless a couple of hours, tossing and thinking. The clean and simple thing to do was ride south across the Border forthwith. The note that he had sent to Inspector Milton was insubordination of a kind that the officer could not and would not overlook. Even before that note, his situation in the Division had been hopeless. He was out of touch with most of the men except Dave Larett; his year on Lone Sioux had spiked any last chance he might have had of adjusting himself to that outfit— In general, he was almost as much an outsider as though he had deserted indeed.

But he felt that he had several loose ends to tuck in before he could cross that Border. He wanted to locate the hide-out of two Assiniboine horse thieves who had been causing trouble in a district over to the east. On *Métis River* there was a half-breed family, a woman and eight children, who had lost father and husband and who had to be taken in to a *métis* settlement. And then, Many Eagles and the little band of Chippewas simply had to be freed of the unjust cattle-thieving charges that stood against them. This obligation weighed the heaviest of all on his mind, after the way the Chippewas had saved him from the Sioux scouting-party.

He thought, *A few days more, just long enough to clean those matters up—it won't make much difference to me. I'll clean 'em up and go then.*

But it was nearly two weeks later—two weeks and a 300-mile swing around the prairie—before he got back to the cabin. There he found a note from Inspector Milton pinned to the wall, asking him to come in to headquarters immediately. There was another note, from Sergeant Larett, in Dave's warm, friendly tone, threatening him with dire consequences if he didn't drop everything and get in to headquarters on the *qui vivi*.

"All right, we're riding to headquarters, Molly m'lady," he said, as he strapped his slender belongings behind the saddle and swung up. "We've got to deliver our report about the horse thieves. And that evidence which will clear Many Eagles and the Chippewas of the cattle-stealing charges—I'm going to cram it right down Milton's throat! The worst he can do is to stick me in the Police butter tub. But I don't think he'll do that. I think he'll just jerk his thumb at the Border and tell me to *git*."

When he reached Sergeant Larett's detachment post on Gopher River, he learned that Dave had gone to headquarters yesterday, leaving word for him to follow at once. From the men there he learned that Dave Larett was being promoted to an inspectorship and sent north to a new Saskatchewan post as Officer Commanding. He was immensely glad of Dave's good fortune, but the news left him with a lonely ache, as he rode on toward headquarters. Dave Larett had been his only real friend in the whole outfit, and Dave would be hundreds of miles away.

"But I guess it don't matter any, Molly," he said. "When you've got to walk out of a door and never come back, it don't matter much what you leave behind."

A few miles from headquarters he met up with a Mounted constable who was returning from a routine patrol. The constable gave him some very surprising news, as they rode on in together. Trouble was breaking out among the Sioux leaders, the constable said. Rumor had it that Pretty Bear and Spotted Cougar had definitely decided to return south of the Border, and several other sub-chiefs were of a mind to follow them. A liaison party of Yank Cavalry had come up three days ago to dicker with the Sioux and talk things over with Inspector Milton. Every one of the Sioux camps, the constable said, was in a restless, ugly mood, and no one really knew which way the cat would hop.

The news made Prawl shiver and sweat. Without being told, he knew that the loss of the buffalo herd had precipitated this smoldering trouble. He wondered if In-

spector Milton knew about the part he had played in that buffalo business, and also if Red Haley's commanding officer knew about Haley's part. The loss of the buffalo herd might send the unpredictable Sioux back across the Border, but just as easily it could stir up a hornet's nest and bring on another Little Big Horn.

At headquarters post, the lodges of half a dozen Sioux sub-chiefs were pitched to the east of the quadrangle. On the west side stood five large tents of the Yankee Cavalry party. Behind one of these Prawl caught sight of a familiar, rawboned, redheaded figure industriously washing shirts and socks at a wooden tub, and he thought, *Well, Red hasn't been put in the jug yet. Maybe they don't know about the trick he and I pulled with those buffaloes.*

As he started to dismount at the side door of the barracks, a corporal came out and told him that Sergeant Larett and Inspector Milton wanted to see him the minute he came in. "They're over in Milton's cabin," the constable added. "There's a little lull right now in their negotiations with the Yankees and the Sioux, and you'd better hurry right over."

Prawl rode across to the officer's cabin, dismounted, knocked at the door, and went in.

Dave Larett and Inspector Milton were seated at the officer's work table, with papers and reports spread out all around them. Both looked up. Sergeant Larett said, "Why hello, Bing; where the hell have you been?" Inspector Milton nodded and smiled as he returned Prawl's salute, and said, "I'm glad to see you, Constable." He added drily, "Won't you sit down—I understand that you've been doing a lot of riding in the last couple of weeks."

Awkwardly Prawl took a chair and laid his Stetson on the floor. The friendliness of Inspector Milton's tone puzzled him considerably. He had never had much friendliness from the officer; now, after that exchange of notes, he simply could not imagine why Milton was speaking to him in accents of kindness.

Inspector Milton eyed him for a moment. "I won't beat around the bush, Constable," he said. "We know about your stampeding that buffalo herd across the Border and about Trooper Haley's taking them on south. Naturally the Sioux know about it too. In fact, everybody knows about it." He drummed on the desk and lowered his voice. "Privately I think it was a good idea. It brought these Sioux face to face with hunger, and they're listening to what we tell them. But officially, of course, I have to disavow your act. Likewise, the Yankee Cavalry captain has had to disavow Haley's part in it. Officially I have had to assure the Sioux that you would be given severe punishment."

He paused again. Prawl turned red and squirmed. Then the officer went on:

"Of course, I didn't have to tell the Sioux that I was going to suspend your punishment. But that's what I'm going to do. Also, I'm going to transfer you entirely out of this country. After that buffalo trick, if one of these Sioux scouting-parties should ever meet up with you out on the prairie, I'm sure you'd never get back to post. For another thing—well, to be plain about it, you've been off on the wrong foot in this Division, Prawl, and maybe a clean start somewhere else will change the picture for you. I hope so. I decided, therefore, to detach you from my command and assign you to Sergeant—I mean, *Inspector*—David Larett here. As you may have heard, he's being sent north to establish a new post in upper Saskatchewan, and I thought you might like to go with him."

Prawl fidgeted and swallowed hard. "Why—uh," he stammered, "that's damned decent of you, sir. I know I've been a square peg in a round hole around here. I know you people expected and wanted me to desert and if I'd been decent about it, that's what I would have done long ago. But somehow I couldn't—I just couldn't. It's damned fine of you not to jug me for pulling that buffalo trick on the Sioux. I fully expected, after that lousy note I wrote you—"

Dave Larett started a little. Under the table he reached

out with his boot and gave Prawl a kick on the shins. Prawl did not understand. He merely knew that he had said something all wrong.

Inspector Milton frowned in a puzzled way. "What lousy note? Why, that answer of yours to my somewhat blunt reprimand was quite nice. In fact"—he smiled a little—"that note of yours was the only respectful and friendly report I ever remember receiving from you, Prawl. It was the thing that started me to thinking that perhaps I'd been judging you too harshly and that you'd respond to an overture of friendship if I'd make it."

Prawl scratched at his head, utterly bewildered. He opened his mouth and started to say that he didn't know what the inspector was talking about. But then Dave Larett reached out and kicked him a second time—so hard that Prawl winced and grunted. He looked at Larett and at Milton, and finally the truth dawned upon him:

Milton had never got that defiant and insubordinate note. Dave Larett had intercepted it. And not only that but Larett had written another note altogether and sent it on to Milton. *That* was why the inspector had called it "a nice note." That was why the officer was now looking at him in a different light—and why Dave Larett was kicking his shins off under the table.

Dave Larett growled at him, "Since you're under my command now, Constable, I have to advise you that you're under arrest until further notice. Go and put your horse away and get something to eat, and then go and get into jail. If you meet any of those Sioux outside, you'd better give them a wide berth. When I get through here, I'll talk to you personally, down at the butter tub and get your report on these last two weeks. Until my detachment starts north, you will remain in the butter tub. If it's true that no one can get out of there, it's also true that none of these Sioux can get in there and get at you."

In a sort of daze Prawl walked out of Inspector Milton's cabin and stood there a moment, blinking his eyes in the hot prairie sunshine. Over at the Cavalry tent the red-headed trooper caught sight of him and waved, and Prawl

lifted a hand in answer. Molly edged up and nosed his arm as if asking for her oats. Prawl fondled her ears and rubbed her nose.

"It's Northward ho for us, Molly m'lady," he said softly. "No more Sioux and no more buffaloes and no more bamboo slides. Maybe you and me can get somewhere in this damned Force yet!"



The Reformation of Calliope

By O. HENRY

CALLIOPE CATESBY was in his humors again. Ennui was upon him. This goodly promontory, the earth—particularly that portion of it known as Quicksand—was to him no more than a pestilent congregation of vapors. Over-taken by the megrims, the philosopher may seek relief in soliloquy; my lady find solace in tears; the flaccid Easterner scold at the millinery bills of his women folk. Such recourse was insufficient to the denizens of Quicksand. Calliope, especially, was wont to express his ennui according to his lights.

Overnight Calliope had hung out signals of approaching low spirits. He had kicked his own dog on the porch of the Occidental Hotel, and refused to apologize. He had become capricious and fault-finding in conversation. While strolling about he reached often for twigs of mesquite and chewed the leaves fiercely. That was always an ominous act. Another symptom alarming to those who were familiar with the different stages of his doldrums was his increasing politeness and a tendency to use formal phrases. A husky softness succeeded the usual penetrating drawl in his tones. A dangerous courtesy marked his manners. Later, his smile became crooked, the left side of his mouth slanting upward, and Quicksand got ready to stand from under.

At this stage Calliope generally began to drink. Finally, about midnight, he was seen going homeward, saluting those whom he met with exaggerated but inoffensive courtesy. Not yet was Calliope's melancholy at the danger point. He would seat himself at the window of the room he occupied over Silvester's tonsorial parlors and there chant lugubrious and tuneless ballads until morning, accompanying the noises by appropriate maltreat-

ment of a jingling guitar. More magnanimous than Nero, he would thus give musical warning of the forthcoming municipal upheaval that Quicksand was scheduled to endure.

A quiet, amiable man was Calliope Catesby at other times—quiet to indolence, and amiable to worthlessness. At best he was a loafer and a nuisance; at worst he was the Terror of Quicksand. His ostensible occupation was something subordinate in the real-estate line; he drove the beguiled Easterner in buckboards out to look over lots and ranch property. Originally he came from one of the Gulf States, his lank six feet, slurring rhythm of speech, and sectional idioms giving evidence of his birth-place.

And yet, after taking on Western adjustments, this languid pine-box whittler, cracker-barrel hugger, shady-corner loungee of the cotton fields and sumac hills of the South became famed as a bad man among men who had made a lifelong study of the art of truculence.

At nine the next morning Calliope was fit. Inspired by his own barbarous melodies and the contents of his jug, he was ready-primed to gather fresh laurels from the diffident brow of Quicksand. Encircled and criss-crossed with cartridge belts, abundantly garnished with revolvers, and copiously drunk, he poured forth into Quicksand's main street. Too chivalrous to surprise and capture a town by silent sortie, he paused at the nearest corner and emitted his slogan—that fearful, brassy yell, so reminiscent of the steam piano, that had gained for him the classic appellation that had superseded his own baptismal name. Following close upon his vociferation came three shots from his .45 by way of limbering up the guns and testing his aim. A yellow dog, the personal property of Colonel Swazey, the proprietor of the Occidental, fell feet upward in the dust with one farewell yelp. A Mexican who was crossing the street from the Blue Front grocery, carrying in his hand a bottle of kerosene, was stimulated to a sudden and admirable burst of speed, still grasping the neck of the shattered

bottle. The new gilt weathercock on Judge Riley's lemon and ultramarine two-story residence shivered, flapped, and hung by a splinter, the sport of the wanton breezes.

The artillery was in trim. Calliope's hand was steady. The high, calm ecstasy of habitual battle was upon him, though slightly embittered by the sadness of Alexander in that his conquests were limited to the small world of Quicksand.

Down the street went Calliope, shooting right and left. Glass fell like hail; dogs vamosed; chickens flew, squawking; feminine voices shrieked concernedly to youngsters at large. The din was perforated at intervals by the staccato of the Terror's guns, and was drowned periodically by the brazen screech that Quicksand knew so well. The occasion of Calliope's low spirits were legal holidays in Quicksand. All along the main street in advance of his coming clerks were putting up shutters and closing doors. Business would languish for a space. The right of way was Calliope's, and as he advanced, observing the dearth of opposition and the few opportunities for distraction, his ennui perceptibly increased.

But some four squares farther down lively preparations were being made to minister to Mr. Catesby's love for interchange of compliments and repartee. On the previous night numerous messengers had hastened to advise Buck Patterson, the city marshal, of Calliope's impending eruption. The patience of that official, often strained in extending leniency toward the disturber's misdeeds, had been overtaxed. In Quicksand some indulgence was accorded the natural ebullition of human nature. Providing that the lives of the more useful citizens were not recklessly squandered, or too much property needlessly laid waste, the community sentiment was against a too strict enforcement of the law. But Calliope had raised the limit. His outbursts had been too frequent and too violent to come within the classification of a normal and sanitary relaxation of spirit.

Buck Patterson had been expecting and awaiting in his little ten-by-twelve frame office that preliminary yell

announcing that Calliope was feeling blue. When the signal came the city marshal rose to his feet and buckled on his guns. Two deputy sheriffs and three citizens who had proven the edible qualities of fire also stood up, ready to bandy with Calliope's leaden jocularities.

"Gather that fellow in," said Buck Patterson, setting for the lines of the campaign. "Don't have no talk, but shoot as soon as you can get a show. Keep behind cover and bring him down. He's a no-good 'un. It's up to Calliope to turn up his toes this time, I reckon. Go to him all spraddled out, boys. And don't git too reckless, for what Calliope shoots at he hits."

Buck Patterson, tall, muscular, and solemn-faced, with his bright *City Marshal* badge shining on the breast of his blue flannel shirt, gave his posse directions for the onslaught upon Calliope. The plan was to accomplish the downfall of the Quicksand Terror without loss to the attacking party, if possible.

The splenetic Calliope, unconscious of retributive plots, was steaming down the channel, cannonading on either side, when he suddenly became aware of breakers ahead. The city marshal and one of the deputies rose up behind some dry-goods boxes half a square to the front and opened fire. At the same time the rest of the posse, divided, shelled him from two side streets up which they were cautiously maneuvering from a well-executed detour.

The first volley broke the lock of one of Calliope's guns, cut a neat underbit in his right ear, and exploded a cartridge in his crossbelt, scorching his ribs as it burst. Feeling braced up by this unexpected tonic to his spiritual depression, Calliope executed a fortissimo note from his upper registers, and returned the fire like an echo. The upholders of the law dodged at his flash, but a trifle too late to save one of the deputies a bullet just above the elbow, and the marshal a bleeding cheek from a splinter that a ball tore from a box he had ducked behind.

And now Calliope met the enemy's tactics in kind.

Choosing with a rapid eye the street from which the weakest and least accurate fire had come, he invaded it in a double-quick, abandoning the unprotected middle of the street. With rare cunning the opposing force in that direction—one of the deputies and two of the valorous volunteers—waited, concealed by beer barrels, until Calliope had passed their retreat, and then peppered him from the rear. In another moment they were reinforced by the marshal and his other men, and then Calliope felt that in order to successfully prolong the delights of the controversy he must find some means of reducing the great odds against him. His eye fell upon a structure that seemed to hold out this promise, providing he could reach it.

Not far away was the little railroad station, its building a strong box house, ten by twenty feet, resting upon a platform four feet above the ground. Windows were in each of its walls. Something like a fort it might become to a man thus sorely pressed by superior numbers.

Calliope made a bold and rapid spurt for it, the marshal's crowd "smoking" him as he ran. He reached the haven in safety, the station agent leaving the building by a window, like a flying squirrel, as the garrison entered the door.

Patterson and his supporters halted under protection of a pile of lumber and held consultations. In the station was an unterrified desperado who was an excellent shot and carried an abundance of ammunition. For 30 yards on each side of the besieged was a stretch of bare, open ground. It was a sure thing that the man who attempted to enter that unprotected area would be stopped by one of Calliope's bullets.

The city marshal was resolved. He had decided that Calliope Catesby should no more wake the echoes of Quicksand with his strident whoop. He had so announced. Officially and personally he felt imperatively bound to put the soft pedal on that instrument of discord. It played bad tunes.

Standing near was a hand truck used in the manipula-

tion of small freight. It stood by a shed full of sacked wool, a consignment from one of the sheep ranches. On this truck the marshal and his men piled three heavy sacks of wool. Stooping low, Buck Patterson started for Calliope's fort, slowly pushing this loaded truck before him for protection. The posse, scattering broadly, stood ready to nip the besieged in case he should show himself in an effort to repel the juggernaut of justice that was creeping upon him. Only once did Calliope make demonstration. He fired from a window and some tufts of wool spurted from the marshal's trustworthy bulwark. The return shots from the posse pattered against the window frame of the fort. No loss resulted on either side.

The marshal was too deeply engrossed in steering his protected battleship to be aware of the approach of the morning train until he was within a few feet of the platform. The train was coming up on the other side of it. It stopped only one minute at Quicksand. What an opportunity it would offer to Calliope! He had only to step out the other door, mount the train, and away.

Abandoning his breastworks, Buck, with his gun ready, dashed up the steps and into the room, driving open the closed door with one heave of his weighty shoulder. The members of the posse heard one shot fired inside, and then there was silence.

At length the wounded man opened his eyes. After a blank space he again could see and hear and feel and think. Turning his eyes about, he found himself lying on a wooden bench. A tall man with a perplexed countenance, wearing a big badge with *City Marshal* engraved upon it, stood over him. A little old woman in black, with a wrinkled face and sparkling black eyes was holding a wet handkerchief against one of his temples. He was trying to get these facts fixed in his mind and connected with past events, when the old woman began to talk.

"There now, great, big, strong man! That bullet never tetched ye! Jest skeeted along the side of your head and sort of paralyzed ye for a spell. I've heerd of sech things

afor! Con-cussion is what they names it. Abel Wadkins used to kill squirrels that way—barkin' 'em, Abe called it. You jest been barked, sir, and you'll be all right in a little bit. Feel lots better already, don't ye! You just lay still a while longer and let me bathe your head. You don't know me, I reckon, and 'tain't surprisin' that you shouldn't. I come in on that train from Alabama to see my son. Big son, ain't he? Lands! You wouldn't hardly think he'd ever been a baby, would ye? This is my son, sir."

Half turning, the old woman looked up at the standing man, her worn face lighting with a proud and wonderful smile. She reached out one veined and calloused hand and took one of her son's. Then smiling cheerily down at the prostrate man, she continued to dip the handkerchief in the waiting-room tin washbasin and gently apply it to his temple. She had the benevolent garrulity of old age.

"I ain't seen my son before," she continued, "in eight years. One of my nephews, Elkanah Price, he's a conductor on one of them railroads, and he got me a pass to come out here. I can stay a whole week on it, and then it'll take me back again. Jest think, now, that little boy of mine has got to be a officer—a city marshal of a whole town! That's something like a constable, ain't it? I never knowed he was a officer; he didn't say nothin' about it in his letters. I reckon he thought his old mother'd be skeered about the danger he was in. But, laws! I never was much of a hand to git skeered. 'Tain't no use. I heard them guns a-shootin' while I was gittin' off them cars, and I see smoke a-comin' out of the depot, but I jest walked right along. Then I see son's face lookin' out through the window. I knowed him at oncet. He met me at the door, and squeezed me 'most to death. And there you was, sir, a-lyin' there jest like you was dead, and I 'lowed we'd see what might be done to help sot you up."

"I think I'll sit up now," said the concussion patient. "I'm feeling pretty fair by this time."

He sat, somewhat weakly yet, leaning against the wall. He was a rugged man, big-boned and straight. His eyes, steady and keen, seemed to linger upon the face of the man standing so still above him. His look wandered often from the face he studied to the marshal's badge upon the other's breast.

"Yes, yes, you'll be all right," said the old woman, patting his arm, "if you don't get to cuttin' up agin, and havin' folks shootin' at you. Son told me about you, sir, while you was layin' senseless on the floor. Don't you take it as meddlesome fer an old woman with a son as big as you to talk about it. And you mustn't hold no grudge ag'in my son for havin' to shoot at ye. A officer has got to take up for the law—it's his duty—and them that acts bad and lives wrong has to suffer. Don't blame my son any, sir—'tain't his fault. He's always been a good boy—good when he was growin' up, and kind and 'bedient and well-behaved. Won't you let me advise you, sir, not to do so no more? Be a good man, and leave liquor alone and live peaceably and godly. Keep away from bad company and work honest and sleep sweet."

The black-mittened hand of the old pleader gently touched the breast of the man she addressed. Very earnest and candid her old, worn face looked. In her rusty black dress and antique bonnet she sat, near the close of a long life, and epitomized the experience of the world. Still the man to whom she spoke gazed above her head, contemplating the silent son of the old mother.

"What does the marshal say?" he asked. "Does he believe the advice is good? Suppose the marshal speaks up and says if the talk's all right?"

The tall man moved uneasily. He fingered the badge on his breast for a moment, and then he put an arm around the old woman and drew her close to him. She smiled the unchanging mother smile of three-score years, and patted his big brown hand with her crooked, mittened fingers while her son spoke.

"I say this," he said, looking squarely into the eyes of the other man, "that if I was in your place I'd follow it.

If I was a drunken, desp'rate character, without shame or hope, I'd follow it. If I was in your place and you was in mine I'd say: 'Marshal, I'm willin' to swear if you'll give me the chance I'll quit the racket. I'll drop the tanglefoot and the gunplay, and won't play hoss no more. I'll be a good citizen and go to work and quit my foolishness. So help me God!' That's what I'd say to you if you was marshal and I was in your place."

"Hear my son talkin'," said the old woman softly. "Hear him, sir. You promise to be good and he won't do you no harm. Forty-one year ago his heart first beat ag'in mine, and it's beat true ever since."

The other man rose to his feet, trying his limbs and stretching his muscles. "Then," said he, "if you was in my place and said that, and I was marshal, I'd say: 'Go free, and do your best to keep your promise.'"

"Lawsy!" exclaimed the old woman in a sudden flutter, "ef I didn't clear forget that trunk of mine! I see a man settin' it on the platform jest as I seen son's face in the window, and it went plum out of my head. There's eight jars of home-made quince jam in that trunk that I made myself. I wouldn't have nothin' happen to them jars for a red apple."

Away to the door she trotted, spry and anxious, and then Calliope Catesby spoke out to Buck Patterson:

"I just couldn't help it, Buck. I seen her through the window a-comin' in. She had never heard a word 'bout my tough ways. I didn't have the nerve to let her know I was a worthless cuss bein' hunted down by the community. There you was lyin' where my shot laid you, like you was dead. The idea struck me sudden, and I just took your badge off and fastened it onto myself, and I fastened my reputation onto you. I told her I was the marshal and you was a holy terror. You can take your badge back now, Buck."

With shaking fingers Calliope began to unfasten the disk of metal from his shirt.

"Easy there!" said Buck Patterson. "You keep that badge right where it is, Calliope Catesby. Don't you

dare to take it off till the day your mother leaves this town. You'll be city marshal of Quicksand as long as she's here to know it. After I stir around town a bit and put 'em on I'll guarantee that nobody won't give the thing away to her. And say, you leather-headed, rip-roarin', low-down son of a locoed cyclone, you follow that advice she gave me! I'm goin' to take some of it myself, too."

"Buck," said Calliope feelingly, "ef I don't I hope I may—"

"Shut up," said Buck. "She's a-comin' back."



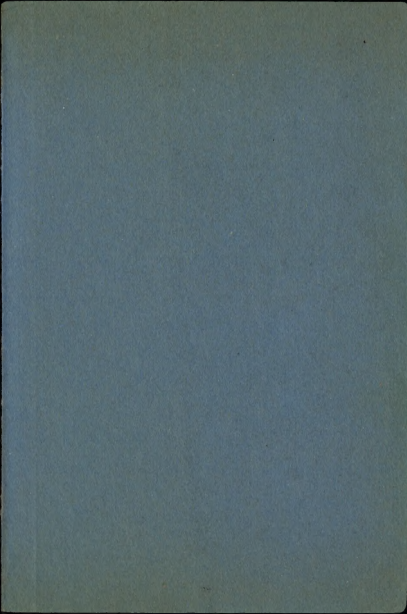
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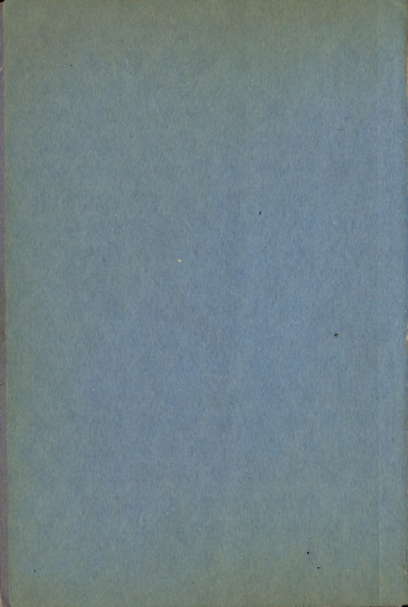
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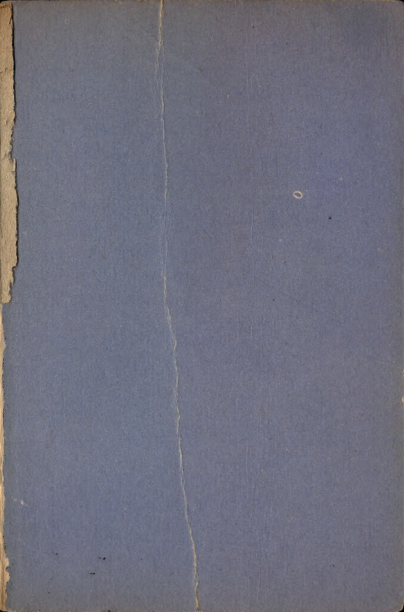


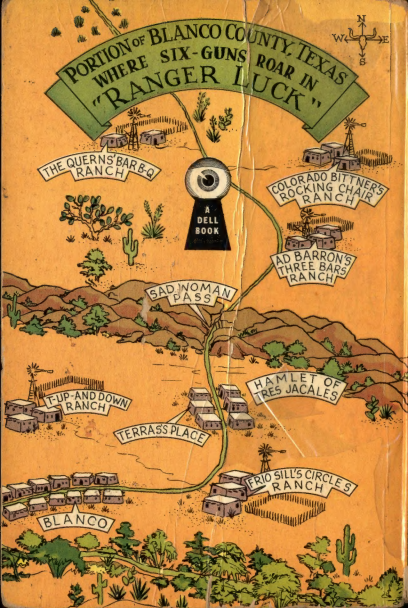
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